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Benefits stigma in Britain



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Key points

This report set out to investigate the stigma attached to claiming benefits in Britain today, using an original MORI survey conducted in May 2012, focus groups with claimants and non-claimants, re-analysis of existing survey data, and an analysis of articles about benefits in national newspapers from 1995 to 2011. We use stigma throughout this report as a term to describe the idea that a characteristic – in this case claiming benefits – is seen to be embarrassing or shameful and to lead to a lower social status. We argue that benefits are primarily stigmatised when they are seen as an undeserved and unreciprocated gift.

- We suggest that benefit stigma can operate on three levels, personal, social, and institutional, although these interact. Our survey found that personal stigma was restricted to a minority, social stigma is quite common, and that institutional stigma is widespread.
- Benefit stigma in Britain is primarily driven by the perception that claimants are 'undeserving'. Key criteria for achieving a 'deserving' status were need, and the level of responsibility that claimants were seen to hold for their own situation.
- To look at the extent to which claimants were seen as deserving, we examined public estimates of the proportion of claimants seen as 'claiming falsely' or 'committing fraud'. We found that the public vastly overestimate these numbers.
- Data suggests that people now see claimants as less deserving than they did 20 years ago, with some changes happening in the late 1990s and others in the early 2000s.
- The media is often blamed for levels of stigma in Britain. Our analysis of media coverage of benefits in national newspapers from 1995 to 2011 found that while newspapers contain both positive and negative representations of claimants, the content of press stories is indeed skewed towards negative representations.
- It is sometimes stated that coverage has become 'more negative' over recent years. Over the longer term we find that negative coverage in 2010/11 was at about the same level as in the late 1990s, an earlier period of intense media coverage of benefits.
- However both the language and content of 'negative' coverage have changed substantially over time. While fraud remains very important in negative coverage, articles are much more likely now to refer to lack of reciprocity and effort on the part of claimants than they were previously.
- We found evidence – including from an experimental prime in our Ipsos MORI survey – to support the idea that negative media coverage is linked to stigma.
- It is hard to tell from the outside if someone is 'deserving'. Political attitudes (possibly linked to media coverage) therefore seem to affect whether we interpret the people we meet as deserving or undeserving.
- The other links between personal experience and stigma are complex, but we found no evidence of a 'dependency culture' in which those living in areas where more people claim benefits experience less stigma.
- International evidence suggests that countries with benefit systems based on contribution or on citizenship, rather than on a means tested basis, are less likely to see high levels of benefits stigma.
- Quantitative and qualitative evidence suggests that stigma is playing a role in explaining non-take-up of benefits and tax credits, with around one in four respondents to the MORI survey giving at least one stigma-related reason for delaying or not claiming.
- Focus group participants report a clear negative impact of stigma on feelings of self worth.

- Evidence about the success of tax credits in reducing the stigma attached to claiming financial support suggests that we can change levels of stigma in Britain. The report therefore concludes with recommendations on the design of the benefits system; benefits delivery; the media; and public messages about benefits.

Executive summary

Alan: OK, ermm, parasites, skivers, work-shy, lazy, stupid, feckless... (JSA group).

Zara: We're classed as being scroungers, work-shy, that kind of thing. All the negative stuff (Disability benefits claimant group).

Modern welfare states have usually made it a priority to provide support in a way that avoids the stigma associated with earlier forms of social assistance, such as private charity and 'poor law' provision. This objective was based on concerns about ensuring equality of status but also about maximising the effectiveness of benefit systems in addressing social risks and poverty – if people feel that claiming benefits is in some way shameful, they will be less likely to take up the help they are entitled to.

Recently however concerns have grown that the stigma attached to claiming benefits has increased. In August 2011, 47% of disabled people said that attitudes towards them had got worse in the past year,¹ while in February this year six major disability charities warned about 'rising public resentment' of disability benefit claimants fed by a 'government focus on alleged "scrounger" fraud and media coverage'.

This report sets out to investigate the stigma attached to claiming benefits in Britain today. It uses data from three original pieces of research: a large-scale opinion poll conducted in May 2012 by Ipsos MORI; a series of focus groups held during the summer of 2012; and an analysis of national newspaper coverage from 1995 to 2011. It also draws on analysis of existing UK and international survey evidence and the extensive research literature on benefit stigma.

The report set out to answer three main questions:

- To what extent is claiming benefits stigmatised in Britain?
- What are the drivers of benefit stigma?
- What impact does stigma have?

We use stigma throughout this report as a term to describe the idea that a characteristic – in this case claiming benefits – is seen to be embarrassing or shameful and to lead to a lower social status. We suggest that there are three levels at which this stigma could operate:

1. 'Personal stigma': a person's own feeling that claiming benefits is shameful.
2. 'Social stigma': the feeling that other people judge claiming benefits to be shameful and to confer a lower social status.
3. 'Institutional stigma': stigma that arises from the process of claiming benefits.

These forms of stigma inevitably interact, and where possible we investigate the relationship between attitudes at each of these levels.

We argue that claimants are primarily stigmatised when they are seen as undeserving or failing to reciprocate a gift [or as a form of undeserved private charity]. It has often been argued that the stigma attached to claiming benefits is due to the fact that they are seen as unreciprocated gifts, breaking deeply embedded forms of reciprocity. We argue that benefits do not inherently need to be seen in this way, and that there are two ways that this stigma can be escaped. Firstly, benefit recipients who are seen as deserving recipients of assistance may not be stigmatised due to feelings of solidarity. Key criteria for deservingness are need, and the extent to which the claimant's situation is their own responsibility. Secondly, benefits which are seen as entitlements are also not subject to stigma. The criteria for entitlement may be prior contributions (tapping in to the value of reciprocity), or citizenship (as in the case of Child Benefit until very recently). It is important

¹ ComRes poll for Scope Mar/May 2012.

to note that there are no clear dividing lines between 'stigma' and its absence – these two criteria operate together and on a spectrum.

Claiming benefits may also be stigmatised because of who people are rather than because of what they do, with benefit claims serving as a marker for other forms of stigma (e.g. unemployment, single parenthood or disability), reinforcing demarcations between social groups. We do not have space in this report to fully investigate these forms of stigma, but refer to them where possible.

To what extent is claiming benefits stigmatised in Britain?

Our survey found that personal stigma was restricted to a minority, social stigma is quite common, and that institutional stigma is widespread. Our representative survey found that personal stigma – a person's own view that claiming benefits is shameful – is restricted to a minority. We then looked at social stigma, our perception that other people think claiming benefits is shameful. Focus group participants were more likely to say other people felt this, but the survey showed that social stigma was quite common; about half of respondents suggested they perceive at least some social stigma. Finally, we looked at institutional stigma from the process of claiming benefits. This was commonly reported by our focus group participants and survey respondents alike.

The stigma of claiming benefits in Britain

Type of benefit	No stigma (%)	Moderate stigma (%)	High stigma (%)
Personal stigma	68–72	21–24	8–10
Social stigma	51–54	35–37	11–13
Institutional stigma	15	39	46

Source: MORI survey May 2012, from 2,423 valid respondents; see text & Appendices for details. Ranges refer to different levels of stigma among different types of claimants.

Alan: I think as long as the jobcentre are treating everybody who comes through their door like second-rate citizens, you're going to feel like second-rate citizens applying for benefits. And the general public is going to see everybody walking through the doors of the jobcentre as second-rate citizens as well (JSA group).

What are the drivers of benefit stigma?

We suggest that benefit stigma in Britain is primarily driven by the perception that claimants are 'undeserving'. As we suggested above, stigma attaches to benefits when claimants are seen as undeserving recipients of unreciprocated gifts, or charity. A significant theme in our focus groups was the distinction between deserving and undeserving claimants.

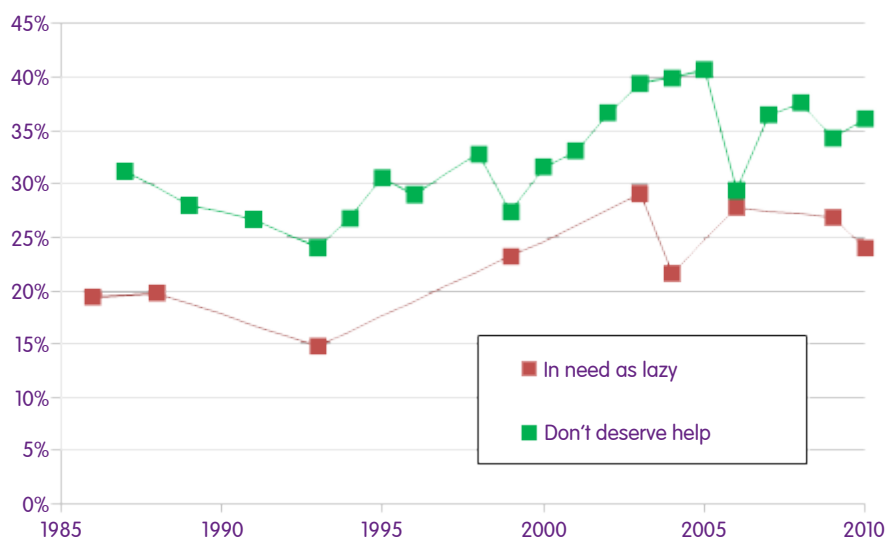
Key criteria for achieving a 'deserving' status were need, and the level of responsibility that claimants were seen to hold for their own situation. Assessing this responsibility took different forms for different claimant types. For unemployed and working tax credit claimants, the key test was seen to be that they were 'making an effort' to address their solution, either by looking for work, or by attempting to increase their hours. For disabled claimants, responsibility attached to efforts, where possible, to improve their health situation. And for single parents, the idea of responsibility was around how they had ended up as a single parent – a question that seemed to turn principally on their sexual behaviour.

Anne: If somebody's making an effort to get back to work there's usually some sympathy there. If you suspect that the bad back is not a bad back, and there's a scam, then there's none at all (Non-claimant group).

Belinda: I think that if you saw a person, a well dressed lady or man, and they said that they were on benefits, you'd probably have a more sympathetic view to them. But maybe a mother of three, and the kids have got different dads, you might think look at her, she's just having kids, and I think it's maybe your personal view on how you kind of judge people (Non-claimant group).

To look at the extent to which claimants were seen as deserving, we examined public estimates of the proportion of claimants seen as 'claiming falsely' or 'committing fraud'. We found that the public vastly overestimate these numbers. However, it is important to stress that few people think a majority of claimants are false (only 16–20%) or fraudulent (only 14%), with most people instead believing that fraud/false claims are restricted to a sizeable minority.

Data suggests that people now see claimants as less deserving than they did 20 years ago, with some changes happening in the late 1990s and others in the early 2000s. Over time the views of the British public on the deservingness of claimants seem to have shifted: people are more likely to say that claimants don't deserve help and that people in need are lazy.



The media is often blamed for levels of stigma in Britain. Our analysis of media coverage of benefits in national newspapers from 1995 to 2011 found that while newspapers contain both positive and negative representations of claimants, the content of press stories is indeed skewed towards negative representations. (Positive and negative language is more balanced than the actual content of newspaper stories, as many articles about undeserving claimants will briefly refer to deserving claimants as a contrast). The content of articles is considerably more likely to refer to characteristics associated with 'undeservingness' such as dishonesty or failing to demonstrate reciprocity than 'deservingness' in the form of need or disability. There is a lot of variation between titles, although only two titles did not show a skew towards negative coverage.

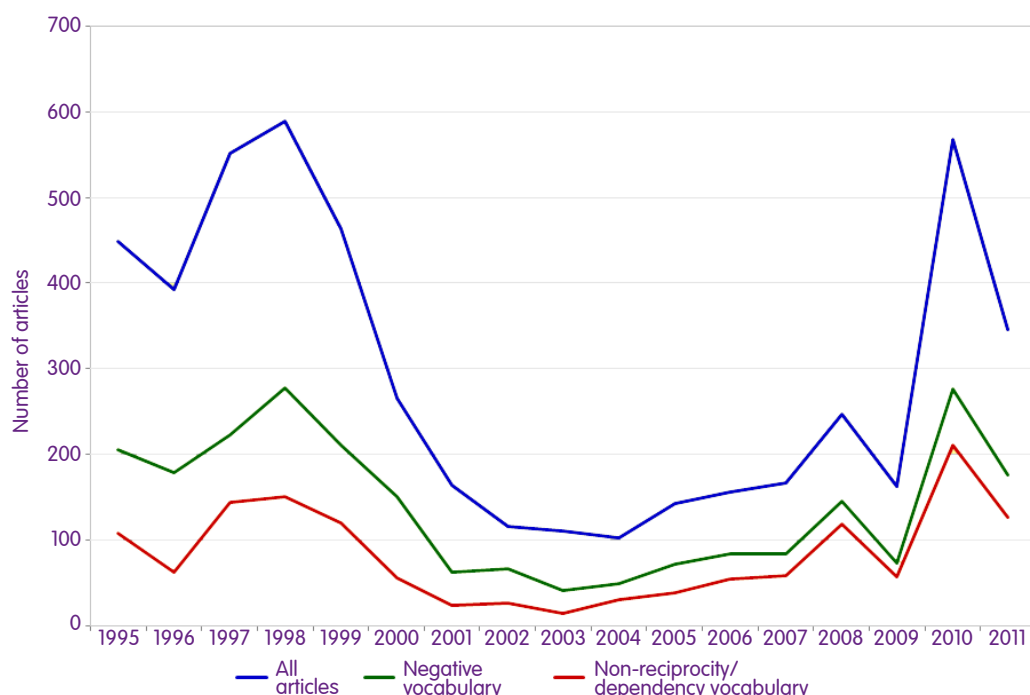
The amount of coverage referencing fraud is very high in all titles (ranging from 21% to 39%) given the actual incidence of benefit fraud. Although tabloids publish a lot of stories about individual cases of benefit fraud based on prosecutions, the main source for stories about fraud is the policy process – statements from government and opposition parties, parliamentary committees and organisations. It is arguable therefore that welfare policy and politics are more important than editorial policy in driving high coverage of fraud overall, although this is not necessarily the case for all titles.

It is sometimes stated that coverage has become 'more negative' over recent years. Over the longer term we find that negative coverage in 2010/11 was at about the same level as in the late 1990s, an earlier period of intense media coverage of benefits. While it is true that the number of stories with negative content has grown, this is because

all coverage of benefits has grown rather than because coverage has shifted towards negativity.

However both the language and content of 'negative' coverage have changed substantially over time. While fraud remains very important in negative coverage, articles are much more likely now to refer to lack of reciprocity and effort on the part of claimants than they were previously. This shift in language seems to date from around 2008. So while coverage has not generally become 'more negative', the rise in a 'scrounger' discourse about claimants which many have referred to is a genuine phenomenon. The content of news coverage shows a similar shift, with more of a focus on claims which are held to be illegitimate for reasons other than fraud.

Negative vocabulary in newspaper articles on working age benefits: consistent titles, 1995-2011



We found evidence – including from an experimental prime in our Ipsos MORI survey – to support the idea that negative media coverage is linked to stigma. Firstly, we found that people who read more stigmatising newspapers perceived higher levels of fraud and reported more personal stigma. Secondly, taking into account other factors that are associated with newspaper readership, we still found a link between newspaper coverage and perceived deservingness. Finally, we randomly primed some people in our survey to think about fraud, and found these people reported higher levels of personal stigma. All of this suggests that there is a genuine link between negative media coverage and stigma – although we can only fully appreciate the media's impact when we consider its inter-relationship with people's everyday experiences.

It is hard to tell from the outside if someone is 'deserving'. Our prior beliefs about benefits and claimants (which we partly get from media coverage) therefore seem to affect whether we interpret the people we meet as deserving or undeserving. We found that people living in neighbourhoods with more benefit claimants perceive more fraud and report more self-stigma – but this is only true if they are inclined to view benefit claimants negatively (perhaps because of media portrayals). Given that the deservingness of benefit claimants is often hidden – the majority of disability benefit claimants say their disability is not visible to people who first meet them – people who already stigmatise benefits claimants may be more likely to both 'see undeservingness' and to see undeserving claimants as typical.

The other links between personal experience and stigma are complex. People in low social grades and with low education also attach more stigma to claiming benefits, which may partly be because of 'seeing undeservingness', but may also be a way for low-status

people to enhance their own self-identity, and/or a displacement of people's financial worries.

Looking at the relationship between knowledge of claimants and stigma, there is no sign here that knowing claimants reduces stigma or perceived fraud – but this may be because we have no direct measures of how many claimants people know, and how well they know them. Examining the opposite thesis – that areas of high benefit claims and knowledge of benefit claimants create a 'dependency culture' – we find that benefits claimants report lower stigma than non-claimants, as we would expect given evidence on take-up. However, both claimants and non-claimants alike overwhelmingly reject the idea that people should be ashamed to claim benefit, and there is no evidence that people in areas of high benefit claims feel any less stigma (indeed, the reverse is true). There is therefore no support for most of the predictions of the 'dependency culture' thesis.

International evidence suggests that countries with benefit systems based on contribution or on citizenship, rather than on a means tested basis, are less likely to see high levels of benefits stigma.

What is the impact of benefit stigma?

Quantitative and qualitative evidence suggests that stigma is playing a role in explaining non-take-up of benefits and tax credits. Participants in our focus groups believed that stigma would influence their decision whether or not to claim benefits, with some arguing that the design of the benefit system was intended to discourage claiming, and around one in four respondents to the MORI survey giving at least one stigma-related reason for delaying or not claiming.

Jim: There's loads of people who don't claim for various reasons, one of them being that I think coz they know what it's like, you're dealing with like a monolith of sort of bureaucracy, and you have to really have a strong sort of condition to er, have a fight in you sometimes. (JSA group).

Looking at trends over time, non-take-up of benefits has risen concurrently with stigma.

Stigma may therefore have played a role in non-take-up trends, although this evidence is only suggestive rather than definitive. We can, however, see a notable success in recent years in reducing stigma when we look at tax credits. People were more likely to say that they would delay/avoid claiming benefits than tax credits due both to (i) 'how you would feel about yourself for claiming (e.g. 'pride', dislike of 'charity')'; and (ii) 'thinking [benefits/tax credits] are for other people, not people like me'. Together with the increase in tax credit take-up over time, this suggests tax credits have been successful in reducing stigma.

Beyond the impact of stigma on take up, focus group participants were clear that stigma had a negative impact on their own sense of self worth. Claimants of disability benefits described the process of demonstrating their 'incapacity' in order to make a claim as humiliating and discouraging. Jobseeker's Allowance claimants spoke of having to combat feelings of negativity that the distance between perceptions of them as 'scroungers' and their own difficulties in finding employment produced. However, there is mixed evidence from the literature as to whether benefits stigma results in worse mental health for claimants.

Jim: ... I know I'm not like worthless or anything like that, and I know I'm not a scrounging bit of scum but when it's told you over and over again and that's all you hear I can understand some people get really affected by it. Thankfully I'm kind of pig headed enough to be convinced I'm right even if I have 100 people telling me I'm not, but I didn't always used to be like that and it's because I got a bit hardened. (JSA group).

What should we do about stigma?

We have found that benefits stigma contributes to the non-take-up of benefits and has a negative impact on claimants' self worth. To reduce this stigma, we made a number of suggestions on the delivery of benefits, the design of benefit systems, the reporting of stories about benefit claimants, and how politicians could improve communications in this area. Evidence about the success of tax credits in reducing the stigma attached to claiming financial support suggests that we can change levels of stigma in Britain.

On the delivery of benefits we suggest that:

- Jobcentre Plus and other staff (including eligibility assessors such as Atos) should be given periodic training to challenge their own perceptions about claimants, in the same way that social workers are trained to be non-judgmental.
- Claimants who sign a claimant commitment setting out their work-search responsibilities under the new Universal Credit system should receive a counter-signature from their personal adviser, guaranteeing the levels of support that will be provided.
- Claimants should be given choice over which organisation or provider supplies their back-to-work support, as is the case in the Netherlands.

On the design of the benefit system we note that:

- More universal, contributions-based and generous benefits/benefit systems seem to be less stigmatised.

On the role of the media we suggest that:

- Newspapers should try to avoid suggesting that claimants who are not meeting the conditions of benefit entitlements are typical of the wider population claiming benefits.
- Journalists should operate within the code of ethics set out by the National Union of Journalists Disabled Members Council.

Examining the role of policymakers and public messages around benefits:

- We recommend the UK Statistics Authority consider two sets of changes to the Code of Practice for Statistics: firstly, for official statistics to be a credible contribution to public debate, full details need to be available to the public at the same time as journalists, and alternative voices should be heard. Secondly, public providers of official and ad hoc statistics should accept responsibility for predictable and repeated media misinterpretations,² and should act to correct these.
- We recommend that those trying to reduce benefits stigma do not attempt to do this by demonising 'undeserving' claimants, a strategy that has been tried and failed in the past. A conversation that moves away from the individual characteristics of benefit claimants and on to one that looks at the broader issues behind benefit receipt, including economic factors and the significant employment penalties experienced by disabled people, is likely to be more productive, if the aim is to reduce the stigma of claiming benefits. When politicians do talk about claimants they should emphasise typical rather than atypical cases. Most benefit claimants have paid contributions in the past, and will take part in paid work in the future, or contribute in other ways such as caring.

2. When four national titles converge on the same misleading stories after briefing by government officials, as happened with the results of incapacity benefit reassessments, the responsibility surely lies with those providing the briefing <http://www.lefffootforward.org/2011/02/right-wing-press-wrong-on-incapacity-benefit-again/>

1. Introduction

‘In November a Yorkshire villager became the target of repeated attacks by his neighbours. Tiles were ripped from his roof, squibs were posted through his letterbox, and in the street he was subjected to constant abuse. The villager, who was crippled with rheumatoid arthritis, had made the mistake of doing some light gardening while, as his neighbours well knew, he was receiving unemployment benefit. He was just one of thousands who became victims of a mounting hysteria that in the ensuing period created a welfare backlash of cruel and massive proportions’

This story may have echoes of the most horrific stories of today – but this example comes not from 21st-century Britain, but rather from the opening lines of Golding & Middleton’s classic book from 1982, *Images of Welfare*.

This is a reminder that benefits stigma has a long history in Britain. Indeed, the lineage of stigma can be traced through 14th-century laws attempting to punish undeserving vagrants, through the (literal) branding of the undeserving poor in the 16th century, to the humiliation of the workhouses in the 19th century (Golding and Middleton 1982; Page 1984; Spicker 1984; Stone 1984). Stigma was often a *deliberate* tactic to discourage all but the most desperate from applying for support.

Yet while concern about stigma is not unprecedented, 2012 has seen the return of worries about this issue that have not been seen for a number of years – particularly around disability benefits. In August 2011, 47% of disabled people said that attitudes towards them had got worse in the past year,³ while in February this year six major disability charities warned about ‘rising public resentment’ of disability benefit claimants fed by a ‘government focus on alleged “scrounger” fraud and media coverage’⁴; many others have made similar comments.⁵

In this climate, actual evidence is crucial. This report provides such evidence and we are indebted to Elizabeth Finn Care for their support in providing new evidence on the scale, causes and impacts of benefits stigma (and allowing us to follow in a tradition of stigma studies linked to the University of Kent).⁶ In this report we supplement existing evidence with several strands of new research:

- A representative survey of just over 2,500 people from MORI, undertaken in May 2012.
- Four focus groups, including a group of Jobseeker’s Allowance claimants, one of claimants of disability benefits (Disability Living Allowance and Employment and Support Allowance) one of non-claimants, and one containing a mix of claimants and non-claimants.
- A content analysis of media articles dating from 1995.
- Secondary analysis of a variety of existing datasets. This includes previously unanalysed questions on ‘falsely claiming’ benefits from the British Social Attitudes Survey 2007, together with other questions from various years of British Social Attitudes, the European Social Survey, and the World Values Survey.

(We discuss the methodology more fully in the Appendices).

We used this to examine the degree to which negative public attitudes – to the extent that they exist – translate into benefit claimants being stigmatised in Britain today. We also

3 ComRes poll for Scope Mar/May 2012.

4 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2012/feb/05/benefit-cuts-fuelling-abuse-disabled-people>

5 Among others, this includes the chair of the Parliamentary Work and Pensions Select Committee, Dame Anne Begg (<http://blogs.independent.co.uk/2012/08/03/its-not-the-benefit-fraudsters-who-are-targeted-in-the-media-its-the-disabled/>) and the National Union of Journalists Disability Members Council (<http://www.disabilityalliance.org/nuj.htm>).

6 This includes Robert Page’s 1984 book *Stigma*; and Hartley Dean & Peter Taylor-Gooby’s 1992 book *Dependency Culture: The Explosion of a Myth*, both of which were written at Kent.

wanted to try to explain the drivers of public attitudes and beliefs about those who claim benefits, and to examine the impact of these attitudes and beliefs and claimants.

Before this, though, we outline what we mean by 'benefits stigma', and give an overview of the structure of this report.

What is 'benefits stigma'?

We use stigma throughout this report as a term to describe the idea that a characteristic – in this case claiming benefits – is seen to be embarrassing or shameful and to lead to a lower social status.⁷

We refer to 'benefits stigma' as a shorthand for this. However, we need to ask who is imposing this stigma, as there are three different ways in which someone could experience it:

1. Personal stigma: a person's own feeling that claiming benefits is shameful.
2. Social stigma: the feeling that other people judge claiming benefits to be shameful and to confer a lower social status.
3. Institutional stigma: stigma that arises from the process of claiming benefits.

A person might experience any or all of these forms of stigma, and we investigate the extent of each (Chapter 2). It is important to note that these forms of stigma interact. Even if nobody feels personal stigma (that is, if nobody themselves thinks that claiming benefits is shameful), social stigma may still exist. If an individual believes that other people see claiming benefits as conferring a lower social status, even when they themselves do not believe this, they may still experience a sense of shame. Put differently, if we all think that everyone else stigmatises benefits – even if no one actually does – then stigma will exist and may have real consequences.

Widely held beliefs may also be affected by the way in which institutions and officials treat people who make a claim for benefits. Views of this institutional treatment also depend on people's beliefs, as we explore in Chapter 2.

Stigma often has normative connotations, implying that the person holding the stigmatising view is somehow unreasonable or incorrect. However, in this report when we talk about stigma we mean this descriptively, in terms of the shame/embarrassment it causes in practice. Where possible we also examine whether these stigmatising views are justified, trying not to base these on our personal views as researchers but instead by comparing people's beliefs to reality.

Why might claiming benefits be stigmatised?

It has often been suggested (e.g. Spicker 1984; Stuber and Schlesinger 2006) that receiving benefits is seen as shameful because benefit receipt is seen as a way in which we receive a gift but do not offer one in return, thus breaking deeply embedded norms of reciprocity. The suggestion that these norms are important is rooted in studies of gift-giving across different times and cultures. The central insight is that gifts create strong ties of obligation between people and that people who fail to reciprocate gifts incur social penalties including loss of status: 'there is no gift without a counter-gift' (Mauss 1924/1990). Charity – the perception that people are 'receiving' gifts without 'giving' something in return – often has the function of keeping the underprivileged in their place, kindness acting in effect as a humiliating factor' (Frenkel-Brunswick, cited by Spicker: 67).

We suggest in this report that benefits are in some circumstances seen as a form of unreciprocated gifts close to private charity, and that when these gifts are seen as being received by those who do not 'deserve' them, then benefit receipt is seen as being stigmatising.

⁷ This is similar to the definition in Spicker (1984:46) among others.

As Thomas Hobbes put it, there is a clear distinction between charity and benefits which have been legally provided for.

‘Whereas many men... become unable to maintain themselves by their labour; they ought not to be left to the Charity of private persons; but to be provided for ... by the Lawes of the Common-wealth. For as it is Uncharitableness in any man to neglect the impotent; so it is in the Sovereign of a Common-Wealth to expose them to the hazard of such uncertain charity.’ (Hobbes 1651: Pt.II c. 30, p.387, our emphasis).

However, stigma can exist even when the existence of financial support is no longer on a voluntary, charitable basis, but has been guaranteed by legislation.

We suggest there are two ways in which claimants can escape this stigma.

Firstly, they can be seen as deserving recipients of assistance. To anticipate our findings in chapter 3, we suggest that key criteria for ‘deservingness’ are need and responsibility – the extent to which claimants can be seen as responsible for their own situation. The ‘value’ motivating this type of justification for benefits is solidarity – the recognition and meeting of justified need – rather than reciprocity.

Secondly, they can be seen as people who have gained a right to financial support. This right may come as a consequence of citizenship – for example in the case of benefits for children, or as a consequence of a reciprocal transaction – for example paying contributions. Here the value of reciprocity ensures that the benefit is seen as an entitlement, rather than as an unreciprocated gift.

We attempt an initial representation of this conceptual framework in the diagram below, and return to it in chapter 3.



It is important to note that both of these forms of ‘escaping’ the stigma of benefit receipt are on a spectrum – there is no hard and fast divide between stigma and non stigma, and different factors may mean that claimants are seen as moving along each continuum simultaneously. But it is clear that benefit receipt need not be inherently stigmatising, provided certain conditions are met, and we suggest that most of the stigma attached to benefits in Britain is the stigma of being seen as an ‘undeserving’ claimant.

There is a further aspect to stigma that is emotional rather than cognitive, or ‘being wrong’ rather than ‘doing wrong’ in Graham Scambler’s terms (2004). This is stigma that comes from a feeling that claimants are ‘not like us’ (van Oorschoot 2006), partly because of the

perceived characteristics of benefit claimants as a group (e.g. 'benefits lifestyles'; see also Chapter 3), and partly because claiming benefits is a marker of other characteristics that people may be prejudiced against (e.g. race, disability, poverty, single parenthood). Benefits stigma can therefore be a way of moralising a pre-existing group demarcation⁸ (cf. the large body of psychological research on social identity processes). Furthermore, as well as being a result of these other stigmas, it may in turn contribute towards them; for example, in the US benefits stigma is closely associated with prejudice against African-Americans (Gilens 1999), although the role of racial prejudice is much more muted (if still present: see Chapter 4) in the UK setting.

To investigate the stigma of difference would require us to look into each and every one of these other stigmas, and for this reason we do not cover them fully in this report – but we should remember that these form part of the lived experiences of many people claiming benefits, and we briefly consider them where they seemed particularly relevant.

The report is structured as follows:

- Chapter 2 presents our headline findings on the extent of stigma in Britain today.
- Chapter 3 looks more closely at the concept of deserving and undeservingness in relation to benefit receipt, and how this is linked to stigma.
- Chapter 4 focuses on the public discourse around benefit stigma, drawing on our analysis of newspaper coverage.
- Chapter 5 examines explanations for levels of stigma, including the media, personal experience, and the design of the benefit system.
- Chapter 6 examines the impact of benefit stigma on claimants.
- Chapter 7 concludes and suggests recommendations for policymakers and others.

⁸ We thank Peter Taylor-Gooby for suggesting this phrase.

2. What does benefit stigma look like in Britain today?

Summary:

In this chapter we present a picture of the stigma of claiming benefits in Britain, drawing on the existing literature, on our own MORI survey, and on the focus groups. We divide between three types of stigma, which can all contribute to an individual claimant's feelings of shame. Firstly, there is personal stigma, a person's own feeling that claiming benefits is shameful. While this was occasionally mentioned in the focus groups, people more commonly argued it was true of other people than themselves, and in our survey personal stigma is restricted to a minority (albeit a non-negligible one). Secondly, there is social stigma, our perception that other people think claiming benefits is shameful. Again, focus group participants were more likely to say other people felt this, but the survey showed that social stigma was quite common; about half of respondents suggested they perceive at least some social stigma. Finally, there is institutional stigma from the process of claiming benefits. This was commonly reported by our focus group participants and survey respondents alike.

Overall, the results show that benefits stigma exists in Britain, but it is also complex: personal stigma is restricted to a sizeable minority, social stigma is more common, and institutional stigma is widespread.

In this chapter we present a picture of the stigma of claiming benefits in Britain today, drawing on the existing literature, on our own MORI survey, and on the focus groups.

In the focus groups, personal experiences of stigma were discussed predominantly in the context of vignettes. These described individuals, their circumstances, and the benefits that they might be entitled to claim (further details can be found in Appendix 3). Participants were asked about the considerations that each of these people would take into account when deciding to make the decision about whether to claim benefits, the type of treatment that they would receive from family and friends, and the treatment that they would receive from officials.

While this gives us an understanding of how people think about stigma, we need survey data to see how common this is among the British population – yet surprisingly little data exists. In Golding and Middleton's 1982 *Images of Welfare*, they conducted a survey in two cities (Leicester and Sunderland) in the midst of a 'violent upsurge in anti-welfare feelings' in 1976, and found that 53% thought it was 'embarrassing to have to claim welfare benefits'. The only other survey that we can find⁹ is restricted to past/present tax credit claimants (Breese 2011), where 66% agreed there was a stigma to claiming 'social security benefits' (compared to only 25% for tax credits).¹⁰ Both surveys suggest that stigma is widespread, but they do not divide between different types of stigma, and nor are they representative of the full British population.

Elizabeth Finn Care have already commissioned one nationally representative survey (from YouGov, April 2012) that briefly asked about stigma, finding a relatively small number (8.5%) agreeing that 'I would not tell my friends or family that I was claiming Welfare Benefits as it would be too shameful'. To go beyond this we commissioned a special-purpose module from MORI in May 2012 which therefore represents the fullest picture we have of stigma in Britain today. Full details of the survey are given in Appendix 1 but it is worth drawing attention to the fact that this was a face-to-face survey (rather than a web-based poll), with a total sample size of just over 2,500 people (including special booster samples of benefit claimants themselves). The analyses are weighted to be representative of the British population.

⁹ This excludes studies of stigma as a reason for not taking up benefits, which we cover below. There are also a number of surveys from other countries (by far the best is the detailed US study of stigma by Stuber and colleagues (Stuber and Kronebusch 2004; Stuber and Schlesinger 2006), although this does not use a nationally representative sample), and there are also earlier, typically small-scale studies in the UK (of which the most major is Townsend's (1979) classic 'Poverty in the United Kingdom', where 9% of older Supplementary Benefit recipients said they felt 'very embarrassed or uncomfortable' in claiming, with a further 20% being a little embarrassed).

¹⁰ The survey also found that 18% of tax credit claimants and 6% of Child Benefit claimants felt uncomfortable when claiming (twice as many saying 'a little' as 'a lot'). Many more said they would feel uncomfortable claiming social security, but note that this is a selected sample of people claiming tax credits/Child Benefit, making this comparison difficult to interpret.

Personal stigma

'Personal stigma' is a person's own feeling that claiming benefits is shameful. (Note that people may feel ashamed to claim benefits not because they think that it is shameful, but because they think other people stigmatise it, which we term 'social stigma' below).

We found some evidence of personal stigma in the focus groups, together with a sense that claiming would damage an individual's own sense of pride. One benefit claimant, the partner of a participant in the non-claimant focus group, stated that he had been 'embarrassed' to enter the jobcentre initially, after having been employed for a long period.

Edward¹¹: I felt embarrassed about applying to our local jobcentre at the time, because I'd worked all these years for myself, and I felt embarrassed at having to walk through the door to think, I need it, to even attempt to claim, although I did in the end (Non-claimant group).

However, it was more common for participants to cite examples of personal stigma among acquaintances, rather than reporting this for themselves.

Yasmin: I had a neighbour who chose not to do it and lived off his savings instead, but I think that was more sort of personal pride than actually any knowledge about the benefits system, but he wouldn't even go that far, you know? (agreement) (Disability benefits group).

Jim: I, I do know a couple of people who are entitled to things and don't claim them and I kind of get a bit annoyed with them, particularly the one I know could be claiming JSA and isn't. Because I always say to him, but you're effectively vanished off the system when you're not claiming it. You're not getting your contributions paid for you or anything you know, you're potentially making a problem for yourself later on. But it's because he thinks of the stigma attached to it (JSA group).

So how common are these feelings of stigma in Britain as a whole? A problem with most questions about stigma (e.g. 'do you feel stigmatised?', or the question above on whether you would tell friends/family if you claimed) is that they cover a mixture of personal and social stigma, as both of these will affect how people feel about claiming. In our survey, we carefully designed a question to capture personal stigma separately to social stigma, asking 'How much do YOU YOURSELF agree or disagree that people should feel ashamed to claim [benefit]?', which was repeated for five different types of benefits.¹² Respondents gave their answers on a 0–10 scale of agreement;¹³ we grouped this into 'no stigma' (0–3), 'moderate stigma' (4–6) and 'high stigma' (7–10). (Given that the question asks about feeling ashamed – a stronger form of stigma than just feeling embarrassed (as used by Golding & Middleton) – we have interpreted people saying 'neither agree nor disagree' as showing moderate levels of stigma rather than none).

¹¹ All names have been changed.

¹² The five types of benefits are:

- 'in-work Tax Credits? (These are wage top-ups for the low-paid)'
- 'Jobseekers Allowance? (This is for unemployed people)'
- 'Employment and Support Allowance? (This is for people whose sickness or disability limits their ability to work)'
- 'Income Support for single parents?'
- 'Housing Benefit? (This is help with rent for people on a low income)'
- We look in more detail at the differences between different benefit types below.

¹³ 0 was 'strongly disagree', 5 was 'neither agree nor disagree', and 10 was 'strongly agree'.

Table 1: The personal stigma of claiming benefits in Britain

Type of benefit	No stigma (%)	Moderate stigma (%)	High stigma (%)
Earnings top-ups for people on low wages	70.9	21.4	7.7
Unemployment benefit	69.6	20.9	9.6
Incapacity benefit	71.6	20.7	7.7
Income support for single parents	67.8	22.9	9.3
Housing benefit	68.0	23.7	8.3

Source: MORI survey May 2012, from 2,423 valid respondents; see text & Appendix 1 for details.

The results are shown in Table 1. Looking at the table, it is clear that a small – but far from negligible – number of Britons strongly feel there should be a stigma over benefits claims (8–10%, depending on the benefit in question), and a larger minority (21–24%) think there should be a moderate level of stigma. However, the overwhelming majority do not think that people should be ashamed to claim benefits; similar results are found in a narrower survey of the shame that people with health problems should feel for receiving governmental assistance.¹⁴ Personal stigma exists in Britain, but it is not the majority view.

It is worth putting this low level of stigma in the context of other questions that ask more indirectly about personal stigma. When asked if ‘it is humiliating to receive money without having to work for it’ (in the World Values survey 2000/2004), 39% agreed, only slightly more than those reporting any personal stigma above.¹⁵ People are also relatively proud of the benefits system – over half (52%) in 2003 said they feel very or somewhat proud of Britain’s social security, and a similar number (53%) agreed in 2010¹⁶ that the welfare state was one of Britain’s proudest achievements – which likewise suggests that the system of benefit claims per se is not seen by the majority as shameful.

Social stigma

Social stigma is about our perceptions of whether other people feel that claiming benefits is shameful. If claimants think they do, then they may be embarrassed to be around non-claimants, or even fearful that other people will be openly hostile towards them – something we come back to when we look at the impacts of stigma, in chapter 4.

Participants in our focus groups held mixed views about how family, friends and acquaintances would react to a decision to claim benefits. A key component of stigma here was a perception that benefit claimants would be treated with suspicion by neighbours or acquaintances, with one disability benefit claimant citing an experience whereby her neighbours had (incorrectly) reported her to the DWP for fraud.

Yasmin: Well there’s that awful feeling that people are watching you (agreement), you know?... even just your neighbours, because there is just this feeling of just, sort of unpleasantness around it all, you know like, ‘Oh my God I might do something once a year’, but is somebody going to take that like, ‘Oh look, she’s faking it’, or—

Vidhya: Been there, done that, I know what it’s like, a couple of my neighbours...

Researcher: Really?

¹⁴ Authors’ analysis of British Social Attitudes 2007, where people were presented with descriptions of three different sets of ill-health symptoms (asthma, depression and schizophrenia). Only 6% said that these people ‘definitely should’ or ‘probably should’ feel ‘ashamed to receive governmental assistance’; even for the (milder-seeming) asthma symptoms, only 8% felt they should feel ashamed.

¹⁵ World Values Survey data 2000/2004; see below.

¹⁶ From British Social Attitudes 2003 and 2010 respectively.

Vidhya: Yeah, I got my benefits stopped for nine months. Yeah, I only lived off my DLA for nine months, until I fought the case, and then they realised this person was just fabricating a load of lies. (Disability benefits group).

As this suggests, views about social stigma were related to others' perception of whether the claimant was 'deserving' of the benefits that they claimed, a theme we discuss further in chapter 3.

One participant gave the example of a friend who was reluctant to reveal the fact that she claimed tax credits.

Anne: Well my friend likes people to think that because she is working she is supporting her family, she doesn't like people to know that she has to claim, I mean she's a close friend so I know, but she doesn't tell everybody by any means... (Non-claimant group).

The discussions in the focus groups suggest that a social stigma for claiming benefits per se was attributed to others much more than people felt it themselves. People have a general tendency to think that other people are much more affected by things than they themselves are, something that Lasorsa (1992) calls 'the third person effect'. This makes it critical to see how far British people themselves perceived a social stigma to claiming.

To investigate this, we again had to word our survey question to capture social stigma separately to personal stigma. Our survey therefore asked 'How much do you think PEOPLE IN GENERAL in Britain would agree or disagree, that people should feel ashamed to claim [benefit]?' In every other way this question was the same as the one for personal stigma: it was repeated for five different types of benefits, respondents gave their answers on a 0–10 scale of agreement, and we grouped this into 'no stigma' (0–3), 'moderate stigma' (4–6) and 'high stigma' (7–10). The results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: The social stigma of claiming benefits in Britain

Type of benefit	No stigma (%)	Moderate stigma (%)	High stigma (%)
Earnings top-ups for people on low wages	54.1	34.9	11.0
Unemployment benefit	52.0	36.1	11.9
Incapacity benefit	52.8	35.9	11.3
Income support for single parents	50.7	36.6	12.8
Housing benefit	50.9	36.8	12.3

Source: MORI survey May 2012, from 2,423 valid respondents; see text & Appendices for details.

This shows that for all benefits, high social stigma is relatively rare (11–13%); whereas moderate social stigma is quite common (35–37%). In total, Britain is split when it comes to social stigma: half think that other people will stigmatise benefits claimants to some degree, and half do not.

Institutional stigma

'Institutional stigma' refers to the stigma that arises from the process of claiming benefits, whether dealing with Jobcentre Plus and the DWP (for most benefits), the Treasury (for tax credits), or local authorities (for Housing Benefit and in the near future also Council Tax Benefit). The existing literature finds many reports from benefits claimants that the experience of claiming benefits is unpleasant, for several reasons:

- A lack of privacy over their status as benefits recipients. As Rogers-Dillon (1995:448), put it, 'Even respondents who stated that receiving welfare was nothing to be ashamed of bristled over having their status as public assistance recipients revealed in the course of their daily activities and without their consent.'
- A lack of privacy over other aspects of their lives – whether being overheard due to the lack of privacy within jobcentres (Finn et al 2008:45), or the hated means-test for unemployment benefits in the 1930s.
- The demeaning experience of long waits, which in themselves can communicate that claimants are low-status.
- Feeling looked down on by benefits system staff (Finn et al 2008:45–6), particularly where staff are suspicious about a recipient's entitlement to the benefit (see also below) – in other words, where people feel that they are being treated as undeserving. For example, a claimant in Finn (2008:45) reported having to produce a pamphlet from a friend's funeral service to show that he was not skiving. We return to this in the following chapter.

Participants in the focus groups with experience of claiming benefits confirmed the impression that treatment by officials was often stigmatising, and suggested that this could deter people from claiming benefits (see Chapter 7). Participants reported being 'looked down on' or rudeness, with some citing stronger feelings.

Yasmin: I think they make things difficult to put us off, and they insult us, and they abuse us basically (agreement). I mean, those kind of things are abusive, and I think they just do it to frighten people away, make it difficult—(Disability benefits group)

Fatima: Some people from the jobcentre, they are stupid... (agreement)

Researcher: What do they do?

Fatima: When you are sent on jobcentre, some people do not talk properly to [you], no respect, (agreement), the 'why do you come to the jobcentre?' So it's very rude, like you're not finding a job...

Jenny: Yeah, they treat people very bad (agreement)
(Mixed claimant and non-claimant group).

Alan: I think as long as the jobcentre are treating everybody who comes through their door like second-rate citizens, you're going to feel like second-rate citizens applying for benefits. And the general public is going to see everybody walking through the doors of the jobcentre as second-rate citizens as well (JSA group).

Beyond the behaviour of individual staff, for some claimants, institutional stigma was linked to an idea that 'the system' itself was designed to make claiming difficult. This was notable for participants in the disability benefits group, who believed that the process of claiming was particularly humiliating.

Will: [Talking about DLA claims process] You have to show yourself at your worst and it's ridiculous—

Yasmin: It's humiliating— (ESA 9).

Yasmin: Appalling. I was going to say to you Rachel, do they jump through all these hoops to prove... I don't think so, at all, I think they make things difficult to put us off, and they insult us, and they abuse us basically, (agreement). That is, those kinds of things are abusive, and I think they just do it to frighten people away, make it difficult (Disability benefits group).

It is important to note that treatment by officials was not universally negative. One disability benefit claimant cited an example of a [local authority] official who had been extremely helpful in her claim for Local Housing Allowance [ESA 13], and there was a sense that treatment depended on the individual worker. There are also high overall satisfaction levels for Jobcentre Plus among benefit claimants at around 80%, although even those saying they are 'satisfied' could still express unhappiness at the way they were treated in some respects (Finn et al 2008:11), and this likely reflects the weaknesses of asking about 'satisfaction' rather than the absence of institutional stigma.

To try and look at the prevalence of institutional stigma, our MORI survey asked ‘How much do you agree or disagree, with the following statement: People are generally treated with respect when they claim benefits?’ Again people responded on a 0–10 scale; because the question was worded in the opposite direction, we have grouped responses into ‘no claims stigma’ (7–10), ‘moderate stigma’ (4–6) and ‘high stigma’ (0–3).

Put bluntly, the results show very high levels of institutional stigma. 45.9% reported high institutional stigma (that is, they strongly disagreed that claimants are treated with respect), 38.8% reported moderate claims stigma, and only 15.3% reported no stigma (that is, they strongly agreed that claimants are treated with respect). High levels of claims stigma are also seen in the small amount of other research that exists; for example, 43% of Britons in BSA 2000 thought that ‘People receiving social security are made to feel like second class citizens’.¹⁷ And in a recent (2011) ComRes poll of disabled people for the charity Scope, the majority of people who had come into contact with jobcentre or Employment Agency staff said they had experienced discrimination.¹⁸

Perhaps surprisingly, though, people in the MORI survey who report more personal stigma (and possibly more social stigma) report *less* claims stigma.¹⁹ This suggests that people are thinking about how claimants *should* be treated – if you think that benefits claims should be stigmatised, then you think that the appropriate level of respect for claimants is lower, and you are therefore less likely to disagree that claimants are treated with respect. This issue comes up again when interpreting trends in institutional stigma in Britain, discussed in chapter 3.

A summary of stigma

We can summarise the levels of these three types of stigma in our MORI survey in Table 3 below.

Table 3: The stigma of claiming benefits in Britain

Type of benefit	No stigma (%)	Moderate stigma (%)	High stigma (%)
Personal stigma	68–72	21–24	8–10
Social stigma	51–54	35–37	11–13
Institutional stigma	15	39	46

Source: MORI survey May 2012, from 2,423 valid respondents; see text & Appendices for details. Ranges refer to different levels of stigma among different types of claimants; see previous tables for details.

If we compare personal stigma to social stigma then the results are in some way similar: a small but far from negligible number of Britons feel that other people will strongly stigmatise them for claiming. But there is a larger difference for the more common moderate levels of stigma, where social stigma is higher than personal stigma.²⁰ In other words people’s perceptions of other people’s views here do not seem to be accurate – we generally think that everyone else stigmatises benefits claims more than we do ourselves. In fact, the mismatch between personal and social stigma is even greater on the individual level; for e.g. JSA, 25% thought that others stigmatised JSA claims more than they themselves did (while 8% thought

¹⁷ British Social Attitudes 2000.

¹⁸ This is true in both the March and August polls.

¹⁹ When it comes to reasons to delay or avoid claiming benefits (below), people who report more felt stigma also report more claims stigma (i.e. people who say they would not claim because of ‘how you would feel about yourself for claiming’ are also more likely to not claim because of ‘how I would be treated by officials when applying’). However, when it comes to non-take up – unlike for measures of stigma in this chapter – there is no link between social stigma (‘how friends, family or neighbours would react’) and claims stigma.

²⁰ These differences are statistically significant for all benefit types. It also fits previous smaller-scale research; a widely cited study (Davies and with Reddin 1978) found that only 15 of 226 people said that stigma affected their decision to take up free school meals, while 196 said that stigma affected other people’s decision but not their own. Richardson & Naidoo (1978) find similar results about being unemployed and claiming Supplementary Benefit.

others stigmatised JSA less than themselves), as shown in the table below. We return to this when discussing the role of the media in Chapter 5.

Table 4: Overlap between personal and social stigma applied to JSA

Type of benefit	No stigma (%)	Moderate stigma (%)	High stigma (%)
Personal stigma	68–72	21–24	8–10
Social stigma	51–54	35–37	11–13
Institutional stigma	15	39	46

Source: MORI survey May 2012, from 2,423 valid respondents; see text & Appendices for details. Ranges refer to different levels of stigma among different types of claimants; see previous tables for details.

Looking across to institutional stigma, this is far higher even than social stigma. This may be due in part to question wording (we talk about ‘respect’ rather than ‘shame’ in this question), but we also force people to disagree with the assumption that there is no stigma, which we would expect to lead to lower reported levels of stigma. It therefore seems reasonable to conclude that while personal stigma is restricted to a sizeable minority, social stigma is more common, and institutional stigma is widespread.

3. Deservingness and benefits stigma

Summary

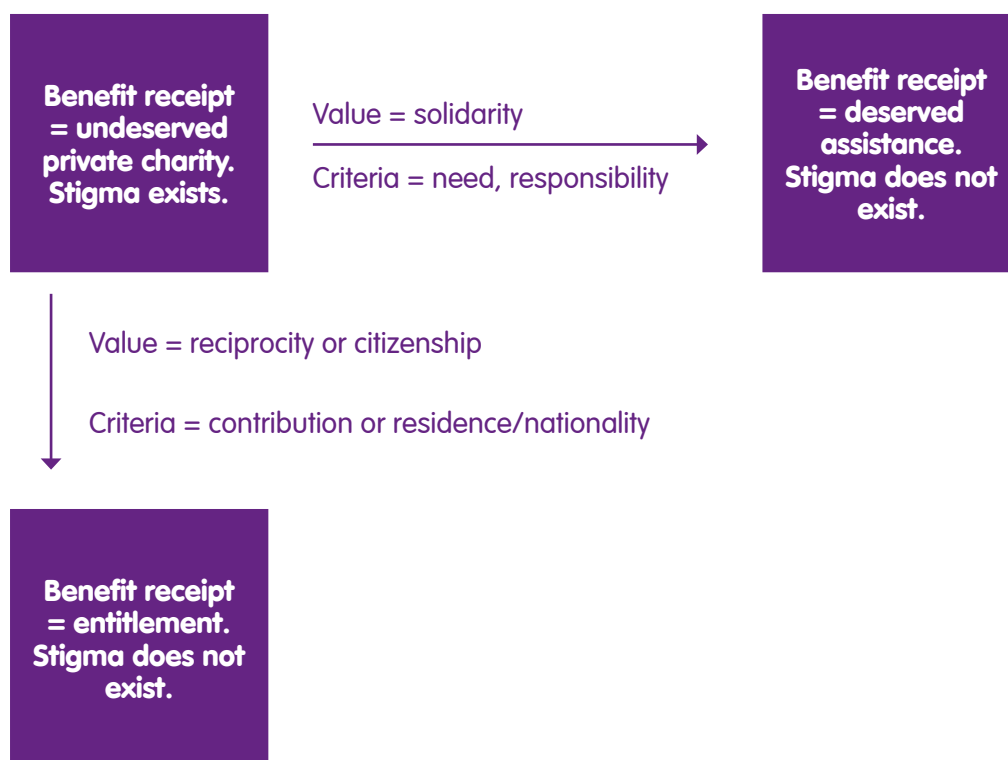
This chapter discusses the distinctions drawn between 'deserving' and 'undeserving' benefit claimants. As we suggested in the introduction, the extent to which benefit claimants are seen as deserving is one key way in which levels of stigma are determined. To the extent that benefit claiming is stigmatised in Britain, this stigma attaches not primarily to the act of claiming benefits per se, but to the act of claiming benefits when it is perceived that they are not deserved.

In general, public views of claimants are split between negative attitudes to 'scroungers' and 'the work-shy', and sympathy towards 'genuine', deserving claimants. These judgments of deservingness are based on a number of criteria, in particular whether claimants need their benefits, and whether they are responsible for their situation (e.g. unemployed people trying to find a job, the 'genuineness' of a disability, and whether single parenthood was a 'choice').

To look at the balance between perceptions of deserving and undeserving claimants, we looked in detail at the proportion of claimants that were seen to 'claim falsely' or 'commit fraud'. We found that people in Britain massively overestimate the level of benefits fraud and false claims compared to any realistic estimate. However, it is important to stress that few people think a majority of claimants are false (only 16–20%) or fraudulent (only 14%), instead believing that fraud/false claims are restricted to a sizeable minority. While we have less precise data over time, it seems that people now see claimants as less deserving than they did 20 years ago, with some changes happening in the late 1990s and others in the early 2000s.

The link between views of deservingness and how stigma is experienced is complex. Claimants nearly always see themselves as deserving – but often feel other people or jobcentre officials view them as undeserving. While deservingness is therefore a minor part of personal stigma, this belief that claimants are seen as 'undeserving' is probably the major part of social and institutional stigma in Britain. Claimants also often sharply contrasted their own deservingness to others' undeservingness, blaming these other claimants for the stigma that they themselves experienced, and sometimes adding to other claimants' feeling of social stigma.

In the introduction we suggested that benefit stigma was linked to the extent that receipt of benefit was seen as a form of undeserved unreciprocated gift, rather than deserved assistance or a form of entitlement. Our conceptual model of this is reproduced below.



We suggest in this chapter that the distinctions drawn along our horizontal spectrum above – from benefit claims as undeserved private charity, to benefit claims as deserved assistance – are a major way in which stigma manifests itself. We look at whether claimants are perceived to be undeserving, examine further what the criteria for ‘deservingness’ are, and assess links between deservingness and how stigma is experienced.

We concentrate less here on moves down the vertical spectrum (from benefits as private charity to benefits as a form of entitlement) as this was less a point of discussion within our focus groups. (This was partly by design; such themes are important when e.g. discussing attitudes towards people claiming the state pension (RS Consulting 2005)). While we also refer to the way in which benefits claimants may be stigmatised because of who they are rather than because of what they do (i.e. the overlap with stigmas on grounds of race, disability, poverty, single parenthood), we do not discuss this in depth.

Deservingness in Britain

Within our focus groups participants drew strong distinctions between deserving and undeserving claimants, suggesting that there were ‘two types’ of benefit claimant in Britain:

Anne: I don’t think that people look at benefits and see them as one group of people, you look at them and see them as two groups, the ones who are trying and the ones who are not really.

Belinda: I think that if you saw a person, a well dressed lady or man, and they said that they were on benefits, you’d probably have a more sympathetic view to them. But maybe a mother of three, and the kids have got different dads, you might think look at her, she’s just having kids, and I think it’s maybe your personal view on how you kind of judge people (Non-claimant group).

One of the central themes of the remainder of this report is about how people see this balance between deserving and undeserving claimants. An initial picture is that only a minority – albeit a sizeable one (36%) – agreed in 2010 that ‘Many people who get social security

don't really deserve any help.' Yet interpreting this on its own is difficult.²¹ Deservingness is a multifaceted phenomenon,²² and we get a better grasp of deservingness if we split it apart to look at the different criteria by which desert is assessed.

Need

To begin with, a deserving claimant was seen as someone who is genuinely in need. Some of the concerns around deservingness in our focus groups were based around seeing claimants who had (what they perceived as) 'luxury items':

Donna: And one of the stigma I know that people I know have said, well you see these people on benefits and they've got Sky, and they've got 50 inch TVs and this and that. Are they spending their benefits on necessities or are they spending them on things they don't really need?

Edward: on luxuries.

This contrasts with those actually claiming benefits, who not only often said that benefits were difficult to live on, but also that they avoided claiming until they were in dire need. As we discuss in chapter 4, perceptions of need are, of course, themselves influenced by perceptions of desert, with those seeing a particular type of claim as 'undeserving' setting a higher bar for the level of need that might justify it. Having children seemed to change the balance of deservingness and people felt it was inappropriate to try and cope without claiming if this involved depriving children of resources that they could otherwise have access to:

Researcher: So do you think if you were in [the position of the people in the tax credits case study], do you think you would claim?

Anne: I would with kids... You don't have a choice in that situation do you. If it's just you and your husband, or you and your boyfriend, you're grown-ups so you can make that decision, but you shouldn't really deprive kids of something they could have. (Non-claimant group).

Control, responsibility and effort

Perhaps the most important aspect of deservingness in relation to benefit claims is whether people are seen to be responsible for their situation (see also Bamfield and Horton 2009 among many others). This responsibility was partly about the cause of their situation, but perhaps more important were the efforts they were making to get out of it. The following quote is typical:

Anne: If somebody's making an effort to get back to work there's usually some sympathy there. If you suspect that the bad back is not a bad back, and there's a scam, then there's none at all. But I know a roofer who fell off a roof and he did damage his back quite badly, he was off work for about 18 months, but in that 18 months he did everything he could to get himself back on his feet and get fit again so that he could go back to work and I don't see anybody having any lack of sympathy for him, because you could see he was hurting... we saw that he was trying very hard to get himself fit, and he went back to work as soon as he could do, so there was no stigma attached to him (Non-claimant group).

In our focus groups we presented people with a series of vignettes illustrating different types of benefit claimants to see if they differentiated between them. As the quote above suggests, we found a responsibility to 'make an effort' was felt for all types of claimant, but that this was applied differently:

²¹ From the question 'Many people who get social security don't really deserve any help' [Source: British Social Attitudes 2010]. However, interpretation is complicated as:

- The proportion agreeing is greater than the numbers disagreeing (29%); the others said they neither agreed nor disagreed.
- It seems possible 'deserve help' is probably closer to being 'in need' than 'deserving' in the broader sense; 88% said 'large numbers of people these days falsely claim benefits', and we would expect 'false claimants' to be considered 'undeserving' in our terms.

²² This section makes use of the deservingness criteria outlined by van Oorschot (2000; 2006).

- **For unemployed claimants**, the main judgment was whether they are 'making an effort to get back to work' (as above). Many of the hostile attitudes to benefit claimants in our focus groups seemed to be directed at unemployed people who were not felt to be trying to get a job.

Fred: From my point of view there are two kinds of unemployed people. There are people who really do not want to work, and people who try, really try, but are unsuccessful. (JSA group).

From the other side, those who were unemployed could feel the sting of others' doubts about whether they were the deserving unemployed:

Anne: Another thing that I picked up on when he [son] was unemployed is that people look at them and think 'well is he earning something anyway, or is there some crime somewhere?'... People don't really believe you're unemployed when you are (Non-claimant group).

- **For tax credit claimants**, the judgments were similar to unemployed people: if claimants were low-paid because they were unwilling to work more than 24 hours,²³ then they were seen as undeserving. This theme did not emerge as often as issues around people not trying to get a job at all, but is particularly relevant as Universal Credit, introduced in October 2013, will require people to demonstrate that they are taking steps to increase their working hours or pay up to a certain threshold.
- **For disability-related benefit claimants**, deservingness was partly about whether people were making efforts to get better (as suggested by the quote on the previous page), but primarily it was assessed on whether they had a 'genuine' disability. Serious, easily verifiable disabilities were strongly felt to be deserving:

Anne: [In response to vignette of claimant with multiple sclerosis] I would totally accept that she needs benefits, I wouldn't argue with any of it, because multiple sclerosis is really tough on some people (Non-claimant group).

In contrast, those whose disabilities are not felt to be genuine are seen to be deliberately playing the system. Rather than being a victim of forces out of their control, they were seen as actively pretending to be disabled to claim benefits.

Graham: I worked for NACRO for a long a while, for a long time and they got people there that their mother's been on the dole, erm, and then suddenly the son's got mental illness, you know what I mean, they know how to fill in everything. The son's supposedly got learning difficulties but they know how to fill in and scam every jobcentre, every benefit (JSA group).

In the ESA group, a few participants commented on the particular difficulty for people with invisible mental health problems in demonstrating their deservingness, and how they are therefore particularly susceptible to being labelled scroungers. Invisible disabilities are not a rare phenomenon; among those people claiming a disability-related benefit in the past year in our MORI survey, we asked how easy it was for people to spot their health problem/disability. Only one in five disabled people said that their disability was usually 'obvious to anyone when they see me in the street'; nearly twice as many said that people usually 'only know about my disability if I tell them'.²⁴ We return to judgments of deservingness for people with hidden disabilities in Chapter 6.

²³ Since April 2012, couples who claim tax credits must work 24 hours in order to qualify.

²⁴ Among 276 people giving an answer to this question, 21% said 'On most days, my health condition/disability is obvious to anyone when they see me in the street', 11% said 'On most days, my health condition/disability is obvious to anyone when they first properly meet me', 28% said 'When people spend some time around me they figure out that I have this health condition/disability', and 39% said 'On most days, people only know about my health problem/disability if I tell them'.

- **For single parent claimants**, ‘responsibility’ applied to their reasons for being a single parent, rather than their behaviour once claiming. Deserving single parents were those whose partner had left them; while undeserving single parents were those who were seen as having chosen to have children primarily in order to claim benefits:

There’s a lot of young people that are just thinking ‘Oh, we’ve got the easy life we can go out and have a baby and have more babies [Participant 7: Oh yeah] and get a house, and also we can get Housing Benefit’ [ESA group]

Unfortunately we were unable to recruit a group of single-parent benefit claimants to examine how these attitudes affected them, although previous research (Page 1984; Yardley 2008) has suggested that they are well aware of the stereotypes that surround single parenthood.

Whether people had ‘chosen’ to claim benefits was therefore central to people’s judgments of claimants – as it is for stigmatised characteristics in general (Crocker et al 1998). It is worth noting that we do not see ‘making an effort’ in this context as a form of reciprocity (as moving people down the vertical axis in our diagram towards benefits as entitlements). Rather, it acts as a test that people are claiming benefits because they have no other option – and are therefore deserving recipients of assistance. This distinction is important when it comes to considering the impact of increasing conditionality on people’s views of claimants, as we discuss in the Recommendations below.

There are no direct questions in UK nationally representative surveys on whether people claim benefits because it is ‘their own fault’. But around 1 in 4 people say that the reason that people are in poverty is because of ‘laziness or lack of willpower’ (see also below).²⁵ Claimants who were seen to be responsible for their situation were often labelled as ‘false’ or ‘fraudulent’ claimants, as we discuss further below.

Other criteria

Wim van Oorschot’s (2000; 2006) influential work on the deservingness of benefit claimants draws attention to reciprocity, need and control, but also to two further criteria: attitudes (whether claimants are compliant and honest), and identity (whether we see claimants as close to ourselves, which we have previously referred to as ‘being wrong’ rather than ‘doing wrong’). Identity can conflict with judging people as needy to the extent that being in need is associated with the stigma of poverty, which makes people be seen as less ‘like us’. This argument has been made forcefully by Christian Albrekt Larsen (2006) who presents evidence from Nordic countries that poorer claimants are seen as less deserving (holding everything else constant) – although we have no evidence on this in the UK.

Claimants may likewise be tarred with related stigmas such as unemployment and disability – other stigmas that are attached to who they are, rather than what they do. The stigma that emerged most in our focus groups was single parenthood, where people made moral judgments about whether the sexual mores of these parents were acceptable. Some parents were seen as responsible for their situation in view of their ‘immoral’ behaviour:

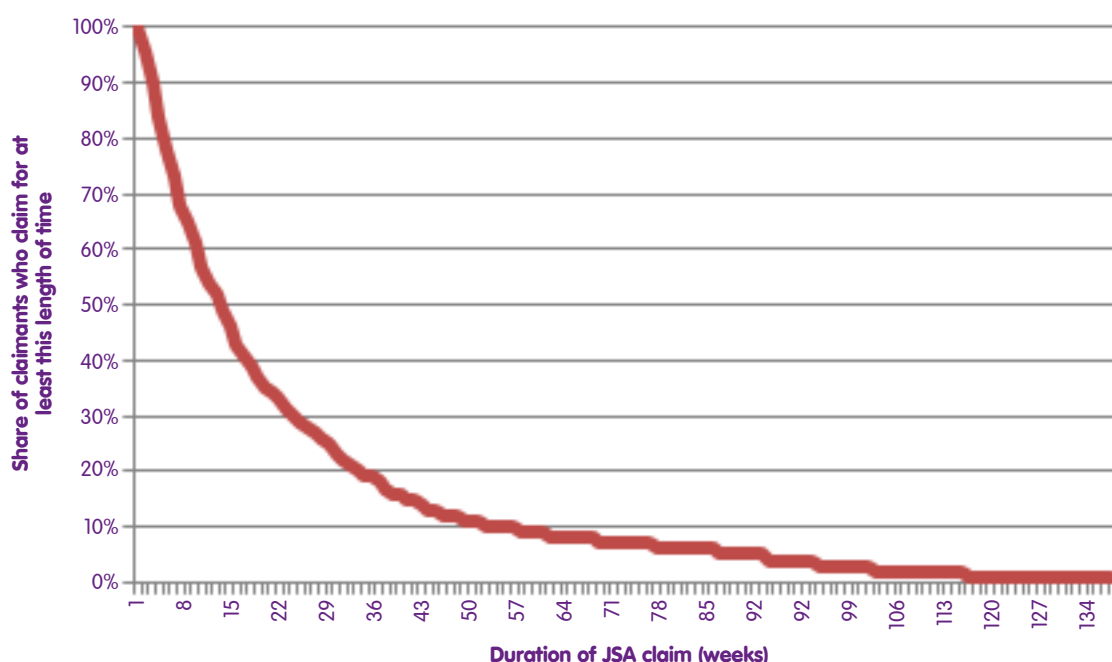
Graham: You don’t always know if your marriage is gonna break up and what have you. But people just, put them all in to get that one description of feckless woman laid on her back, knocked out a few kids and now having to support them (JSA group).

²⁵ Similar implications of undeservingness come from questions that ask if benefits ‘make people lazy’ (56% agree; ESS 2008), ‘make people less willing to look after themselves/family’ (50% agree; ESS 2008) or ‘if welfare benefits weren’t so generous, people would learn to stand on their own two feet’ (56% agree; BSA 2010) – these do not directly ask about deservingness, but by implication they imply that the benefits system itself is making people undeserving. [All of these questions have ‘neither agree nor disagree’ options, which will tend to reduce the proportion of agreement compared to forced choice questions].

Anne: [If] it's just a drunken one night stand, and you've not tried to look after yourself, then I think that might be a bit more an issue of responsibility (Non-claimant group).

While these were the dominant ways that people judged deservingness within our research, previous research has identified a range of other factors. Criminal behaviour among claimants is one,²⁶ as is the perception of the future contributions of claimants. Evidence from a Fabian Society survey in 2009 (Bamfield and Horton 2009) showed that most people do not expect people to fulfil this criterion – only 25% agreed that most claimants would make a contribution in the future (46% disagreed). This is in its own way as bizarre as the overestimation of benefit fraud we discuss below, as benefit claims are much less likely to be long-term than people seem to believe (as shown in Figure 1 for JSA claims, and also true for incapacity claimants²⁷). Part of the problem may be that people get very little information about the scale of turnover in benefit caseloads: for example, about 125,000 people leave Employment Support Allowance every three months²⁸.

Figure 1: Duration of Jobseeker's Allowance claims in weeks



Source: Data from DWP/Ministry of Justice data linking project 'Offending employment and benefits' <http://www.justice.gov.uk/downloads/statistics/mojstats/offending-employment-benefits-emerging-findings-tables.xls>.

The balance between deserving and undeserving claimants

These are the criteria by which people divide the deserving and undeserving – but how common do British people think both groups are? Although participants within our research drew strong distinctions between deserving and undeserving claimants, they saw the dominant view of benefit claimants as undeserving. When asked how benefits claimants were seen, the words 'scrounger' and 'lazy' appeared in nearly all of our focus groups:²⁹

²⁶ See <http://inequalitiesblog.wordpress.com/2012/01/10/the-criminal-benefit-claiming-class/>

²⁷ For example, it has been shown that for the benefit which tends to have the longest durations, Incapacity Benefit (now being replaced with Employment Support Allowance), nearly half of claims between 2003 and 2008 were for two years or less and 63% were for less than five years. Given that these figures include a significant proportion of people with severe long-term disabilities, the stereotype of the long-term undeserving IB claimant is very exaggerated (see Gaffney 2011).

²⁸ Gaffney D 'The benefit system as a 24-hour carpark' <http://lartsocial.org/24hourcarpark>

²⁹ The only focus group where these words were not mentioned was one with people who did not speak English well.

Alan: OK, ermm, parasites, skivers, work-shy, lazy, stupid, feckless... (JSA group).

Zara: We're classed as being scroungers, work-shy, that kind of thing. All the negative stuff (Disability benefits claimant group).

One way of looking across all of these different deservingness criteria is to look at 'fraud' and 'false claims'.

We here make extensive use of two previously unanalysed questions that ask respondents exactly how many out of every 100 claimants claim benefits falsely (for disability and unemployment benefits separately; British Social Attitudes 2007), as well as a new, specially commissioned question on claiming fraudulently (for all out-of-work benefit claimants; MORI survey).³⁰ Obviously perceived fraud is only one aspect of undeservingness and possibly not the most important. But the advantage with looking at fraud is that we have hard evidence on its scale, while other aspects of undeservingness (e.g. lack of effort) are more subjective, so the question of whether perceptions are accurate is hard to address. The results are shown in Table 5.

Table 5: Perceived benefits fraud / false claims

	False claims: disability benefits (BSA 2007) (%)	False claims: unemployment benefits (BSA 2007) (%)	Fraud: all out-of-work benefits (MORI 2012) (%)
Average person's perception of false claims/fraud (median) ³¹	30	35	25
% thinking a majority (>50%) are fraudulent/false	16	20	14
Actual figures for false claims/fraud ³²	1.1-1.2	3.4	2.0

See footnote 30 for details.

There are three things to take from Table 5.³³ Firstly, perceived fraud (in 2012) is lower than perceived false claims (in 2007) – as we would expect, people mean a broader range of things by 'false claims' than just 'fraud'. (The widely cited Prospect YouGov study in 2012 on 'scroungers' seems to give similar results to the questions on 'false claims'). False claiming

30 BSA 2007 refers to the British Social Attitudes survey; MORI 2012 refers to the May 2012 survey commissioned for this report. The exact question wording is: (i) BSA 2007 – 'Out of every 100 people receiving [sickness or disability/unemployment] benefits, how many do you think are falsely claiming the benefits?'; (ii) MORI 2012 – 'The government release figures on the amount of "benefit fraud" – where some people deliberately deceive the government, as they would not be entitled to benefits if they told the truth. Out of every 100 people claiming out-of-work benefits how many, if any, would you say, commit fraud in this way?' Figures for 'actual figures' refer to claims for incapacity benefits and Disability Living Allowance (false claims = fraud + customer error), unemployment benefit (again fraud + customer error), and to income support + Jobseeker's Allowance + incapacity benefit (for total out-of-work benefits; fraud only); preliminary figures for 2011-12, from http://statistics.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd2/fem/fem_preliminary_1112_revised.pdf [accessed 15/8/2012].

31 The mean responses are 34%, 37% and 29% respectively.

32 The figure for all out-of-work benefits, includes Income Support, Jobseeker's Allowance and Incapacity Benefit/ESA. Preliminary figures for 2011-12, from http://statistics.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd2/fem/fem_preliminary_1112_revised.pdf

33 It is also worth noting that people perceive fewer false disability claims than false unemployment claims (in 2007). This comes as no surprise given that disabled people are consistently perceived to be more deserving than unemployed people across nations and over time (van Oorschot 2000; 2006). However, the difference in perceived false claims between these groups is relatively small.

seems to capture the 'abuse of the system' or 'playing the system' mentioned by our focus group participants, referring to perceived undeservingness irrespective of whether this is technically legal.

Such distinctions are essential when interpreting any survey questions around deservingness, of which there are several even within the British Social Attitudes Survey. In 2010, only 36% agreed that 'Most people on the dole are fiddling in one way or another' (suggesting fraud, including undeclared cash-in-hand work), but 55% agreed that 'Around here, most unemployed people could find a job if they really wanted one' (closer to 'false claims'). Still, even when we are at pains to get people to focus on fraud, the perceived rate is not that much lower than the perceived rate of false claims.

The most important finding, though, is that people in Britain massively overestimate the level of benefits fraud and false claims compared to any realistic estimate. This fits the picture from other, less precisely worded questions; for example, when asked if 'Large numbers of people these days falsely claim benefits' in 2010, as many as 88% agreed,³⁴ and nearly one in four go to the extreme of agreeing that 'people who claim to be disabled often exaggerate the extent of their physical limitations'.³⁵ This is despite the Department of Work and Pensions' own estimates of fraud combined with customer error being 3.4% of unemployment claims and 1.1–1.2% of disability benefit claims.³⁶

While fraud by its nature is hard to measure, we should stress that the official fraud figures are likely to be accurate. Tens of thousands of claims are randomly selected for review each year, and DWP benefit review officers then go out to interview each one of these cases. If fraud is strongly suspected then this is counted as 'fraud' (and the case passed over for investigation); and if someone leaves the benefit seemingly because they are worried about the interview then this is likewise counted as 'fraud' (DWP Information Directorate 2007). This procedure is sufficiently strong that the Centre for Counter Fraud Studies – while castigating the government's poor anti-fraud measures in other areas – accepts the DWP figures unequivocally, praising then for 'measuring their losses accurately since the late 1990s and undertaking a range of work to reduce them over an even longer period' (Gee et al 2010). While some fraud will inevitably be missed in this process, it is difficult to imagine that the true level of fraud is anything close to public perceptions.

Despite these overestimates, it is important to stress that few people think a majority of claimants are false (only 16–20%) or fraudulent (only 14%). This is not always apparent from questions that ask about 'large numbers' or 'many people' falsely claiming, but it can also be seen in the Prospect/YouGov poll. The Prospect/YouGov poll found that only 7% of people said that more than half of 'welfare claimants' were 'scroungers' – and even among Conservative voters, as many as 62% thought that only a minority of claimants were 'scroungers'. And such views also emerged in our focus groups:

Anne: I think it's that people kind of take advantage of the system, and claim when they can... And there are a lot of people, probably the majority of people, who are trying to look for a job and are serious about trying to find a job and just can't (Non-claimant group).

In summary, it is clearly not the case that most people in Britain think that most benefit claimants are undeserving. (This mirrors the earlier finding that most people do not think it is shameful to claim benefits, and we can see other negative attitudes whose prevalence is often overstated³⁷). Nevertheless, most people seem to think that a sizeable minority of claimants are false or even outright fraudulent, to an extent that is out of all proportion with the reality of benefit fraud. These deservingness perceptions are a key component of benefits stigma in Britain.

³⁴ People were forced to either agree or disagree when asked about this question, which may inflate the level of agreement compared to the questions on fiddling or finding a job (reported above).

³⁵ ComRes poll for the Multiple Sclerosis Society Spring 2012

³⁶ Preliminary figures for 2011–12, from http://statistics.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd2/fem/fem_preliminary_1112_revised.pdf [accessed 15/8/2012]. Tax credit fraud estimates are available separately from <http://www.hmrc.gov.uk/stats/personal-tax-credits/error-fraud.htm>

³⁷ It is worth noting that aside from specific questions on benefits, nearly a quarter (24%) think that the main reason people live in need is 'because of laziness or lack of willpower'.

The deservingness of different types of claimants

We have already seen that the deservingness criterion of 'responsibility' means different things for different types of benefit claimants – unemployed people's efforts to find a job, the genuineness of disabilities for incapacity claimants, or whether single parenthood was a 'choice'. Do these lead claimants of different benefits to be seen as more deserving and less stigmatised?

We would expect this to be the case, as the consensus in the academic literature is that there is a hierarchy of perceived deservingness. Wim van Oorschot (2006) shows that people's concerns about the living conditions of different groups follow a consistent order across 23 countries (including the UK): people are most concerned about elderly people, then sick and disabled people, then unemployed people, and are least concerned about immigrants. Likewise, the January 2012 Prospect/YouGov poll showed that the public generally preferred benefits cuts for unemployed people and unmarried single parents,³⁸ no change in support for low-paid people, but wanted increased benefits for disabled people and older people, funded by higher taxes.³⁹ (These are better seen as broad feelings than considered reactions to actual policies; in analyses not shown here people underestimate benefits received by pensioners and those caring for children, and overestimate them for unemployed people).

We would therefore expect a hierarchy of stigma and perceived deservingness – but the evidence quoted so far is primarily about broader attitudes and not deservingness (for example, the Prospect/YouGov poll specifically asks about 'people who receive benefits honestly and legitimately'). In fact, despite the different ways that the deservingness of different groups are judged, it seems that differences in perceived deservingness and stigma in Britain are relatively small:

- In our MORI survey, there was a statistically significant difference in the personal stigma and social stigma of different types of benefit claimants (*Tax credits / Incapacity as the least stigmatised → Unemployment → Housing benefit → Single parents as the most stigmatised*) – but these differences are very small (the gap between top and bottom is 0.2 points on a 0–10 scale). That said, there are slightly larger differences between tax credits and other benefits in terms of whether people say they delay/avoid claiming due to stigma (we discuss this further in Chapter 6).
- To look specifically at deservingness we have to go back to the 2007 British Social Attitudes survey (Table 5). We can here see only small differences in the perceived level of false claims between the two types of claimants that were asked about – the median rate of false claims is perceived to be 35% for unemployment benefits and 30% for disability benefits.

However other research shows much larger gaps between different benefits (see also Chapter 6). The most likely explanation is that our comparisons are restricted to the most similar benefits: different types of means-tested benefits for working-age people. In contrast, the largest differences found in other research are between working-age and older people's benefits (with older people being seen to have earned their benefits through a lifetime of contribution), and between means-tested and contributory benefits (for reasons explored further in Chapter 6). We may also have seen greater differences if we had looked at more specific deservingness criteria (as in Cook and Barrett 1992) rather than simply looking at false claims and the inherent stigma of claimants. In other words, people have different attitudes to people on different benefits – but these differences are complex, and only emerge in response to particular questions. Further research would be helpful here to unravel the narrow but powerful ways in which people distinguish the deservingness of claimants of different benefits.

³⁸ We should note that there is, of course, no specific benefit for 'unmarried single parents'.

³⁹ The question asked, 'Currently, some of our taxes are used to support the following groups. Thinking about taxpayers in general, and people who receive benefits honestly and legitimately, would you prefer income tax rates and the level of support for each group to rise, or income tax rates and support to fall, or is the balance about right?' The groups were, 'Older people (via pension and fuel allowance)' – lower/same/higher/don't know = 9/35/39/17%, 'disabled people (via living allowance)' 11/29/40/20%, 'low-paid people (via benefits)' 23/18/39/20%, 'unemployed people (via benefits)' 42/7/32/20%, 'unmarried single parents (via benefits)' 44/6/29/21%.

Trends in perceived deservingness

While the detailed measures of perceived false claims and fraud are only available for single years, we have broader data on deservingness going back to the early 1980s from British Social Attitudes surveys. The trends for key measures are shown in Figure 1 and Figure 2.

Figure 2: Trends in perceived deservingness in Britain

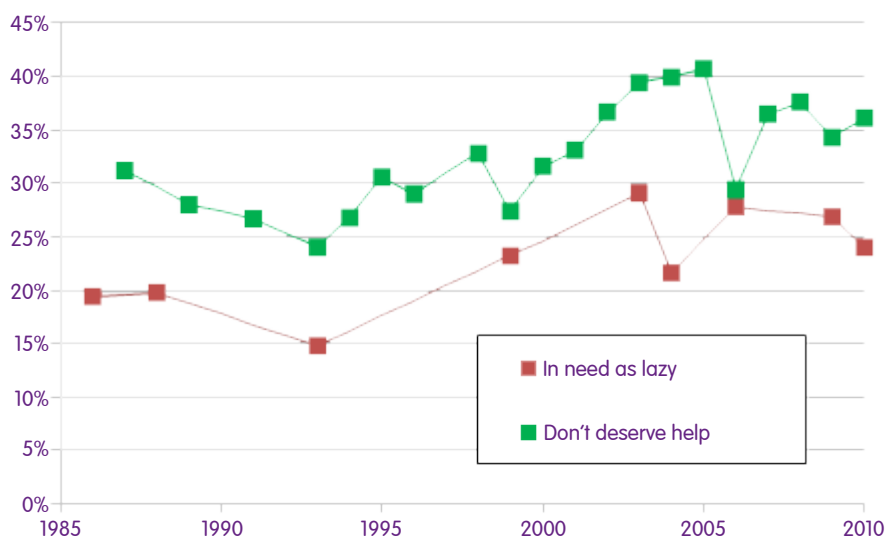
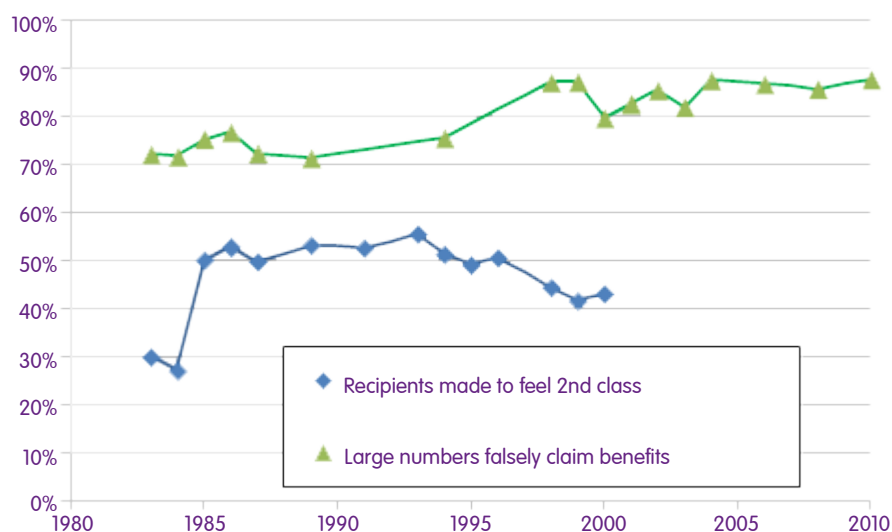


Figure 3: Trends in perceived false claims and claims stigma in Britain



Source: British Social Attitudes.

The link between perceptions of desert and the experience of stigma

How are perceptions of desert linked to the experience of stigma? We have suggested that stigma may be experienced at a personal, social, and institutional level, and discuss here how a perception that a claimant is, or that claimants in general are, undeserving can lead to stigma at each of these.

Claimants typically see themselves as deserving and we did not come across any claimants who felt that they personally were undeserving.

Instead, the greater part of stigma experienced is because claimants often felt that other people (social stigma) or jobcentre officials (institutional stigma) viewed them as undeserving.

For example, a recent survey found that around 60% of disabled people had found that some people simply did not believe they were disabled.⁴⁰

Yet despite the impact of such beliefs on claimants' feeling of being stigmatised, they would often share exactly these beliefs, differentiating themselves sharply from other, undeserving claimants – including both claimants of other benefits and claimants of their own benefit. Whereas JSA claimants believed ESA to be the benefit attracting the most negative public attitudes and suspicion ('you're definitely [seen as] work-shy if you're on ESA' in the words of one JSA claimant), one participant in the group claiming disability benefits perceived the process of claiming JSA to be more stigmatising, and there was a view expressed that claimants of non-disability benefits were more likely to be claiming fraudulently. Similar findings are widely reported across different groups, times and places (US welfare claimants in Briar 1966; unemployed men in Howe 1998:531; British teenage mothers in Yardley 2008).⁴¹

Sometimes people would even blame other claimants' undeservingness for the stigma that they themselves received (see also Chapter 7 on the role of personal experience in stigma):

Rachel: People who abuse the system actually make it harder for **us** in every way possible, because you get guys going playing football, then they're caught because they're claiming benefits, disability, mobility. There is a lot of stigma about us receiving benefits. (Disability benefits group, emphasis added).

Sarah: Specially this current government, that's saying anybody who's on benefits, no matter whether they're using or abusing the system, are scroungers. And that is what the general public are picking up on... we're the ones who are carrying the backlash. Not those who are genuinely capable of going out, getting a job. (Disability benefits group, emphasis added).

Indeed, the overwhelming majority (78%) of disabled people in late 2011 said that those 'claiming disability benefits when they are not disabled' had a very negative effect on public attitudes to disabled people.⁴² The perceived undeservingness of others even seems to 'rub off' on personal stigma, even though people consider themselves deserving: the greater the level of perceived fraud that people reported in our MORI survey, the more ashamed they felt to claim benefits, and the more likely they were to delay/avoid claiming benefits due to personal stigma.⁴³ (Likewise, prompting people to think about fraud made them more likely to report personal stigma, as we discuss further in Chapter 6). This 'rubbing off' effect of undeservingness on stigma may be another explanation for why social stigma was found to be higher than personal stigma in the previous chapter.⁴⁴

We cannot say to what extent our headline findings reported in Chapter 2 relate to the stigma of claiming benefits per se, or to the stigma of claiming benefits as an 'undeserving' claimant. But we think that there is strong evidence, both from our focus groups and the research presented in this chapter, to suggest that the primary way in which stigma operates in Britain is by labelling (some) benefit claimants as 'undeserving'.

This would help to explain the differences between levels of personal and social stigma we saw in Chapter 2. Benefits claimants may not feel self-stigma as they know that they are deserving, but believe either that some other claimants are not deserving, and are therefore stigmatised, or that the public believes (correctly or incorrectly) other claimants to be non-deserving and stigmatised. Claimants' own divisions between the deserving self and undeserving others may therefore actively contribute to the social stigma of claiming benefits in Britain.

40 ComRes poll for Scope Mar/May 2012. An earlier ComRes poll for the Multiple Sclerosis Society in Spring 2012 poll likewise found that 74% of MS Society members agree 'I can think of at least one occasion when someone has questioned the fact I have MS because I looked well'.

41 Likewise, a March 2012 YouGov survey for Elizabeth Finn Care found that 21.9% of all respondents said that they had claimed benefits in the past, but they were 'not like other claimants' as they only claimed for a short time.

42 ComRes survey for Scope Nov/Dec 2011.

43 A few other studies also look at deservingness and stigma directly, and confirm a link (Williamson 1974; Stuber and Schlesinger 2006). And in the wider literature on stigma, stigma is higher wherever people believe that people have control for being in an undesirable state (Crandall and Eshleman 2003:428)

44 Surprisingly, in our MORI survey, the impact of perceived fraud on social stigma was relatively small (half as large as the impact of perceived fraud on personal stigma) and generally non-significant impact. This is likely to be because there is a gap between the respondent's perception of fraud vs. their perception of other's perception of stigma (i.e. even if I think fraud is low, I may think that other people think that fraud is high).

4. Stigma and public discourse

Summary

Media coverage of benefits is often blamed for negative public attitudes and stigma. In this chapter we look at coverage of benefits in the national press from 1995 to 2011 to assess just how negative coverage is and how it has changed over time.

We look at both the language used and the content of articles and find that while newspapers contain both positive and negative representations of claimants, the content of press stories is indeed skewed towards negative representations. (The language used by newspapers appears to be more balanced, simply because many articles refer to deservingness as a contrast to undeserving characteristics). The content of articles is considerably more likely to refer to characteristics associated with 'undeservingness' such as dishonesty or failing to demonstrate reciprocity than to refer to 'deservingness' in the form of need or disability. There is a lot of variation between titles, although only two titles did not show a skew towards negative coverage.

The amount of coverage referencing fraud is very high in all titles given the actual incidence of benefit fraud, ranging from 39% to 21%. Although tabloids publish a lot of stories about individual cases of benefit fraud, the main source for stories about fraud is the policy process – statements from government and opposition parties, parliamentary committees and organisations. Welfare policy and politics are more important than editorial policy in driving high coverage of fraud overall, although this is not necessarily the case for all titles.

It is sometimes stated that coverage has become 'more negative' over recent years. While it is true that the number of stories with negative content has grown since the last general election, this is because all coverage of benefits has grown rather than because coverage has shifted towards negativity. Over the longer term we find that negative coverage in 2010/11 was at about the same level as in the late 1990s, an earlier period of intense media coverage of benefits.

However both the language and content of 'negative' coverage have changed substantially over time. While fraud remains very important in negative coverage, articles are much more likely now to refer to lack of reciprocity on the part of claimants than they were previously. This shift in language seems to date from around 2008. So while coverage has not generally become 'more negative', the rise in a 'scrounger' discourse about claimants which many have referred to is a genuine phenomenon. The content of news coverage shows a similar shift, with more of a focus on claims which are held to be illegitimate for reasons other than fraud.

Although much reporting of issues about benefits is straightforward, we find that many articles are clearly intended to score debating points rather than simply report news. We show this process for news stories which use memorable individual examples to support very general negative assertions about claimants and the benefits system and official statistics, or what are claimed to be official statistics, to similar effect.

In Chapter 3 we suggested that the key form of benefit stigma in Britain today is the stigma of being an undeserving claimant. While benefit claiming per se attracts relatively little stigma, claiming benefits when it is perceived that you do not deserve them is seen as a source of shame. The extent to which claimants are viewed as deserving or undeserving is therefore key to explaining levels of stigma attached to benefits. We showed in Chapter 3 that the public hugely overestimates the level of fraud by benefit claimants, one measure of 'undeservingness'. We also showed that people now see claimants as less deserving than they did 20 years ago, with some changes happening in the late 1990s and others in the early 2000s.

A common explanation for negative attitudes is that the UK media focuses on negative representations of claimants – for example, by giving inordinate space to stories about

benefit fraud. In this chapter we look at national press coverage over the period 1995–2011. How much coverage is negative, in the sense of ascribing the sort of characteristics to claimants that we have drawn attention to as underpinning the stigma of undeservingness – dishonesty, lack of reciprocity and effort to find work – and how much ascribes deservingness, in the sense of need or disability? How has the balance in coverage shifted over time? What drives these aspects of coverage – for example, how important is what government says and does, as opposed to the editorial policies of individual titles? What is the evidence for misrepresentation of claimants?

We begin by giving an overview of coverage, based on quantifying the number of times articles use particular types of language and feature particular content. We then look at how language and content have changed over time, from 1995 to 2011. We then look in more detail at the content and structure of a set of specific stories in which issues of deservingness are highlighted. In chapter 5 we go on to look at the evidence concerning whether or not this coverage has an impact on stigma.

Methodology

We discuss the methodology used to carry out this analysis in more detail in Appendix 3. However, we provide brief details here in order to make clear what it is we are looking at when we examine the results.

Articles on social security from 1995–2011 were sourced from the newspaper database LexisNexis using the following search: [start of article: 'benefits' AND (Anywhere in article) 'welfare' OR 'social security' OR 'dole'] with 'moderate similarity' duplicates excluded. The set of articles on which our analysis is based is therefore is not a sample of articles on working age social security: it is a full census of articles in the LexisNexis database which meet the criteria we set out. The titles searched were *The Times*, the *Mirror*, the *Guardian*, the *Independent* and the *Daily Mail* (from 1995–2011), and the *Telegraph*, the *Sun* and the *Daily Express* (from 2000–2011, the period for which a consistent record of these newspapers exists within the database). After cleaning and removing duplicate and irrelevant articles, our main set for analysis comprises 6,612 articles, representing about half the articles originally sourced through the search.

We analysed this data quantitatively in two ways: looking at the language of articles through an automatic coding of articles according to their use of terms from a set of word-lists; and looking at the content of articles through manual coding of a 20% sample of articles according to various features including type of article.

For our analysis of the language of articles, we conducted an automatic coding using 'word-lists' intended to capture the occurrence of specific concepts and to identify which benefits were being referred to. Articles were then searched for occurrences of these words. The lists draw mainly on the concepts of criteria for deservingness/undeservingness that we discussed in Chapter 3. For undeservingness these are:

- trust, for which we focussed on terms denoting or connoting fraud and dishonesty (including those such as 'faking illness');
- dependency (including 'underclass' and 'unemployable');
- reciprocity and effort, or more precisely, non-reciprocity/lack of effort (e.g. 'handouts', 'something for nothing', 'lazy', 'scrounger');
- outsider status (e.g. 'immigrant', 'obese').

We also compiled lists to capture two concepts which associated with deservingness:

- need (e.g. 'vulnerable', 'hard-pressed'); and
- disability (basically 'disabled', 'disability').

We also looked at overtly hostile language (chav, feral, scum etc) – however we found very few occurrences of these terms in stories about benefits. These word-lists are shown in full in

Appendix 3. Finally we compiled lists of the names of various benefits to enable us to relate vocabulary to specific types of claimant or benefit.

For our analysis of the content of articles, we conducted a manual coding of articles by type (news, feature, opinion piece, letter, other) and for news articles, whether the main news hook of the story related to **policy**, **statistics**, **human interest** (i.e. individual cases), or **other**. For articles that used a statistical news hook, we also coded the source of the statistic (government, organisation, political party etc).

We devised a set of 'themes' to capture aspects of the content of articles: these were subjects which made a substantive contribution to the content of articles (rather than just being referred to in passing, so this is distinct from the previous automatic coding of vocabulary). The themes we chose were based on our own reading of newspaper coverage on benefits (and are therefore no doubt influenced by stories which have been prominent in recent years – had we been doing this in the early 2000s or mid 1990s we might well have chosen a different set of themes). The full set of themes is:

- fraud
- 'shouldn't be claiming' (for reasons other than fraud)
- never worked/hasn't worked for a very long time
- large families on benefits
- bad parenting/antisocial behaviour of families on benefits
- claimants better off on benefits than if they were working
- claimants better off than workers
- immigrants claiming benefits
- compulsion of claimants (e.g. workfare, benefit conditionality)
- cuts to benefits
- need
- disability.

Because we only coded a sample of the coverage, the results below often combine some of these themes into broader categories.

We also wanted to know who was using particular types of language and how they were using it, so we coded the attribution of terms from the word-lists used for automatic coding: language was attributed to **journalist**, **central government**, **non-government public** (e.g. Office of National Statistics), **politician** (Lab, Con, LD, other), **claimants**, **organisations**, or **member of the public**. We also distinguished between use and mention of terms from word-lists: a term is mentioned rather than used if the user distances herself from the usual connotations of the term (for example, by using scare-quotes).

What does the press talk about when it talks about benefits?

In this section we look at the language and content of newspaper coverage of benefits from a very broad perspective, asking about the balance between the negative and the positive (or at least neutral) as these relate to benefit claimants. We start with language by grouping together terms from our 'fraud', 'dependency' and 'non-reciprocity/lack of effort' word-lists on the one hand as a 'negative' category. The terms in these lists have unambiguously

negative connotations which are not dependent on other features of the context.⁴⁵ Similarly we group the 'need' and 'disability' word-lists where standard use of the terms on this list conveys a sympathetic or at least neutral view of claimants regardless of contextual features.

Unless otherwise stated, throughout this chapter we are looking at the number of articles which contain one or more terms from word-lists (rather than, for example, the number of occurrences of terms in articles).

Table 6: % of articles with one or more terms from 'negative' and 'deservingness' word-lists

	All negative	All deserving	Both	Either	Negative only	Deserving only
Sun	78.3	38.3	30.8	85.8	47.5	7.5
Express	68.6	46.6	33.1	82.2	35.6	13.6
Mail	67.3	54.7	36.9	85.0	30.4	17.8
Mirror	51.1	53.4	26.0	78.6	25.2	27.5
Telegraph	44.7	63.5	34.1	74.1	10.6	29.4
Independent	42.7	66.1	29.2	79.5	13.5	36.8
Times	42.1	57.9	24.7	75.3	17.4	33.1
Guardian	35.7	69.2	24.1	80.8	11.7	45.1
All titles	52.0	57.8	29.3	80.5	22.7	28.5

Data: all titles in manually coded sample

Overall 80% of all articles are using terms from one or both of these broad vocabularies. There is enormous variation between titles, with the overall share of articles using negative vocabulary ranging from 78% (the *Sun*) to 36% (the *Guardian*). This means that this percentage of articles is using terms which connote dishonesty, taking out without contributing, lack of effort, or benefit dependency. There is a general pattern of more articles with negative language in tabloids and fewer in broadsheets, with the *Mirror* the least negative of the tabloids at 51% – the share of stories with negative language is over two-thirds for the other tabloids.

We also see that the 'deservingness' vocabulary is pretty common in all titles, ranging from 38% in the *Sun* to 69% in the *Guardian*. A slightly higher proportion of articles overall is using terms from the 'deserving' lists (57%) than the 'negative' lists (52%). This may give the impression that coverage as a whole is slightly skewed towards deservingness: that is not really the case, as we see when we look at the content of articles.

To look at content, we have grouped themes in a similar manner to the grouping of word-lists above. The need and disability themes are combined to give a rough equivalent to the deservingness vocabulary: other themes are classed as negative, with the exception of 'cuts' and 'immigrants claiming benefits', which are excluded from this analysis. These categories are not precisely comparable to the vocabulary categories, but they do provide another – and arguably more accurate – way of looking at the balance of positive and negative.

The ranking of titles on negative content is very similar to that for vocabulary, with the tabloids showing more negative content and the broadsheets less – but note that the *Telegraph* is now very close to the *Mirror*. The big difference is that articles with deservingness content are now clearly in the minority, 38% compared to 53% with negative content.

⁴⁵ The terms in the 'Outsider Group' word-list do not have this property: whether references to migrants or travellers carry negative connotations depends on contextual features of the article and on the expectations of readers.

Table 7: % of articles with one or more 'need/disability' and 'negative' themes

	Negative	Need/ disability	Both	Either	Negative only	Need/ disability only
Sun	81.7	13.3	10.0	85.0	71.7	3.3
Express	69.5	19.5	11.0	78.0	58.5	8.5
Mail	64.5	29.4	13.1	80.8	51.4	16.4
Mirror	61.1	38.9	11.5	88.5	49.6	27.5
Telegraph	60.0	34.1	18.8	75.3	41.2	15.3
Times	43.8	38.8	12.4	70.2	31.5	26.4
Independent	41.5	50.3	17.0	74.9	24.6	33.3
Guardian	32.7	55.3	10.5	77.4	22.2	44.7
All titles	53.4	37.7	12.7	78.4	40.7	25.0

Data: all titles in manually coded sample

So depending on whether we are looking at language or content, we get different pictures of newspaper coverage. This discrepancy is explained by the fact that many articles use language which connotes deservingness but don't have any corresponding content (e.g. if in a story on benefit fraud it is said that fraudsters are taking money away from deserving claimants, this will appear as having 'deservingness' vocabulary but not content). So while the great majority of articles with deservingness content use terms from the 'deservingness' word-list, as we would expect, the converse is not true: there are a lot of articles which use the language of deservingness without saying anything substantive about 'deserving' claimants.⁴⁶ A recent analysis of the coverage of disabled people (discussed further below) likewise found that tabloid newspapers were twice as likely to make such passing references to deserving disabled people as they were to make this a major theme of the article (Briant et al 2011:41)⁴⁷. In other words, a lot of articles seem to use the vocabulary of deservingness in a rhetorical manner just to point up a contrast with undeserving claimants. This shows the importance of looking at content as well as language in assessing coverage.

Cheats and scroungers?

The broad concepts of negativity and deservingness in the previous section tell us something very general about how newspapers report benefits – tabloids tend to show more negativity than broadsheets and the overall balance of content (as opposed to language) is towards negativity. But the broad notion of negativity encompasses a number of different themes, and in this section we analyse the different types of negative vocabulary that are used.

The word-lists are about fraud (terms like 'cheat', 'fiddle' and so on), about dependency (the sense that people have allowed themselves to become over-reliant on benefits, captured by terms like 'languishing (on benefits)', and non-reciprocity/lack of effort (the sense that people are taking out of the system without putting in or not making enough effort to find work, captured by terms like 'scrounger', 'lazy', 'handout' and 'something for nothing culture').

The table below shows the proportion of articles about benefits within each newspaper that uses vocabulary from each of these word-lists.

⁴⁶ Cross-tabulation of the two variables shows that 46% of articles using terms from the 'deservingness' word-list do not contain 'need' or 'disability' content, while only 18% of articles with that content do not use terms from the word-list. Negative vocabulary and content do not show this asymmetry: about a quarter of articles with the content don't use the vocabulary and vice versa.

⁴⁷ For example, Briant et al cite a Daily Mail article with the headline, '75% of Incapacity Claimants are Fit to Work' that included a statement from the Taxpayers' Alliance that 'It's really not fair on taxpayers or those who are genuinely ill'.

Table 8: % of articles with one or more terms from 'negative' word-lists

	All	Fraud	Depend- ency	Non- reciprocity	Any negative
Express	100.0	36.6	18.3	49.9	74.4
Mail	100.0	37.3	19.3	41.6	69.8
Sun	100.0	39.0	7.5	45.4	69.5
Mirror	100.0	34.9	6.6	20.0	50.2
Telegraph	100.0	23.6	21.2	23.4	50.1
Independent	100.0	27.6	13.6	9.8	42.8
Times	100.0	24.5	11.3	10.7	38.8
Guardian	100.0	21.2	12.7	11.8	37.6
All titles	100.0	29.8	13.7	24.5	52.2

Data: main set 1995-2011

The most immediately striking aspect perhaps is just how much of the coverage refers to benefit fraud. Remember that rates of fraud are between 0.5%–3% depending on the benefit in question. But 30% of all articles in the dataset refer to fraud. This is much higher for the tabloids – and as we will see, this is partly because the tabloids report different types of news to the broadsheets. But even among the broadsheets, fraud is referred to in between 21% and 28% of articles.

So the UK press gives a lot of space to benefit fraud. In chapter 5 we consider whether this influences the public's perceptions of fraud levels, and in the next section we look at what drives this.

The prevalence of the dependency vocabulary is in one respect different to the other two negative word-lists: the *Sun* hardly uses it! Nor does the *Mirror*, but the mid-market tabloids use it quite frequently while the *Telegraph* uses it more than the other broadsheets.

There is a major difference between titles when it comes to language about lack of reciprocity. This vocabulary is extremely important in three titles: the two mid-market tabloids, the *Express* and *Mail* and in the *Sun*. It is much less prevalent in the *Mirror* – which, it's worth noting, gives almost as much space to fraud as the other tabloids. Among broadsheets it is (like dependency) most common in the *Telegraph* and relatively rare in the other titles.

Table 8 gives equal weighting to all titles, but obviously the circulation and readership of different newspapers varies a lot. To get a sense of what coverage looks like for the 'average' newspaper reader who is much more likely to read the *Sun* than the *Independent* we have weighted the results using data on readership from the National Readership Survey⁴⁸. Not surprisingly the percentage of stories using any negative vocabulary increases, from 52% to 60%. The most striking change is in the percentage of stories using the non-reciprocity vocabulary, which increases from a quarter to a third. Not only does the press refer to 'scroungers' and 'handouts' a lot, it does so more in titles with higher readership figures.

48 <http://www.nrs.co.uk/probabilities.html> We have used current (2012) readership figures to weight the results.

Table 9: % of articles with one or more terms from 'negative' word-lists

	All	Fraud	Depend- ency	Non- reciprocity	Any negative
All titles	100.0	29.8	13.7	24.5	52.2
Weighted by readership	100.0	34.1	13.0	33.4	60.4.

Data: main set 1995-2011

To summarise, all newspapers in our set give a surprisingly large amount of space to fraud. Three newspapers show an exceptional focus on non-reciprocity and lack of effort – on 'scroungers' as opposed to 'cheats' – although these titles do give a lot of space to 'cheats' as well. The papers in question, the *Sun*, *Mail* and *Express*, are often accused of promoting a 'scrounger rhetoric' with regard to claimants. That accusation seems to be well founded. Nonetheless the vocabulary of 'scrounging' (non-reciprocity) is not confined to these titles. So negative language in coverage of benefits is almost as much about non-reciprocity (people taking out without putting anything in, or a lack of effort to leave benefits) as it is about outright dishonesty, and in some titles the latter is *more* important. When results are adjusted to reflect newspaper readership, not only does the language used become somewhat more negative, but the share of articles using the non-reciprocity vocabulary increases dramatically.

Different type of news coverage

We have seen that tabloids give more space to fraud. How much of this is due to the reporting of individual cases – 'human interest' stories in our jargon – which are a standby of the tabloid press? And how much of fraud coverage is driven by the policy process – government announcements, debate in parliament, think-tank reports and so on? These questions are important if we think newspaper coverage affects public perceptions of claimants: we would like to know to what extent editorial decisions or the different styles of newspapers, as opposed to real-world events such as policy changes, explain the seemingly exaggerated focus on this issue.

To answer these questions we concentrate on news stories – so far we have been looking at all articles indiscriminately. Table 9 shows how news stories break down between different categories of story.

Table 10: % of news articles by type of news

	Human interest	Policy	Statistic	Other
1995-2000	10.9	73.4	14.4	1.4
2001-2011	14.1	59.0	25.2	1.7
All	12.0	68.3	18.2	1.5

Data: manually coded sample 1995–2011. Totals may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

Table 10 shows the share of each article type using the 'fraud' vocabulary (first row) and the share of all articles referring to fraud in each news-type (second row). Across all titles 'human interest' stories account for just under a third of the articles using this vocabulary: for the rest, the news hook (the main piece of information on which the story turns) is to do with policy (45%) or statistics (23%). It is important to note in this context that the great majority of the 'statistics' stories also originate from politicians and stakeholders (rather than from independent statistical bodies such as the ONS⁴⁹).

49 80% are sourced to central government, the two main opposition parties, parliamentary committees and pressure groups.

Thus the UK press's apparent obsession with benefit fraud is fed by the policy process more than by tabloid stories about individuals. Given the actual scale of fraud, this amount of policy-related coverage suggests there is something awry with the policy discourse on social security.

Table 11: Fraud vocabulary by news type

	Human interest	Policy	Statistic	Other	All
% referring to fraud	53.8	21.7	33.5	30.8	29.7
% of all articles that refer to fraud	31.2	1.5	45.0	22.3	100.0

Data: manually coded sample

We asked to what extent high coverage of fraud reflected editorial policy: clearly the tabloids' preference for negative human interest stories is likely to be important, as more of these types of stories contain fraud content. Partly confirming this (in analysis not shown), it is only in human interest stories that tabloids are more likely than other newspapers to report fraud: otherwise they show similar levels of coverage to broadsheets. This is not to underplay the strongly negative tone of tabloid coverage, and as we discuss below, it may be that negative human interest stories are more memorable than other types of news and therefore have greater impacts on social stigma.

Overall, this section suggests that if there is a tendency for the press to give exaggerated attention to fraud, this is far from being confined to the tabloids' interest in human interest stories about fraud, and owes a lot to the policy process.

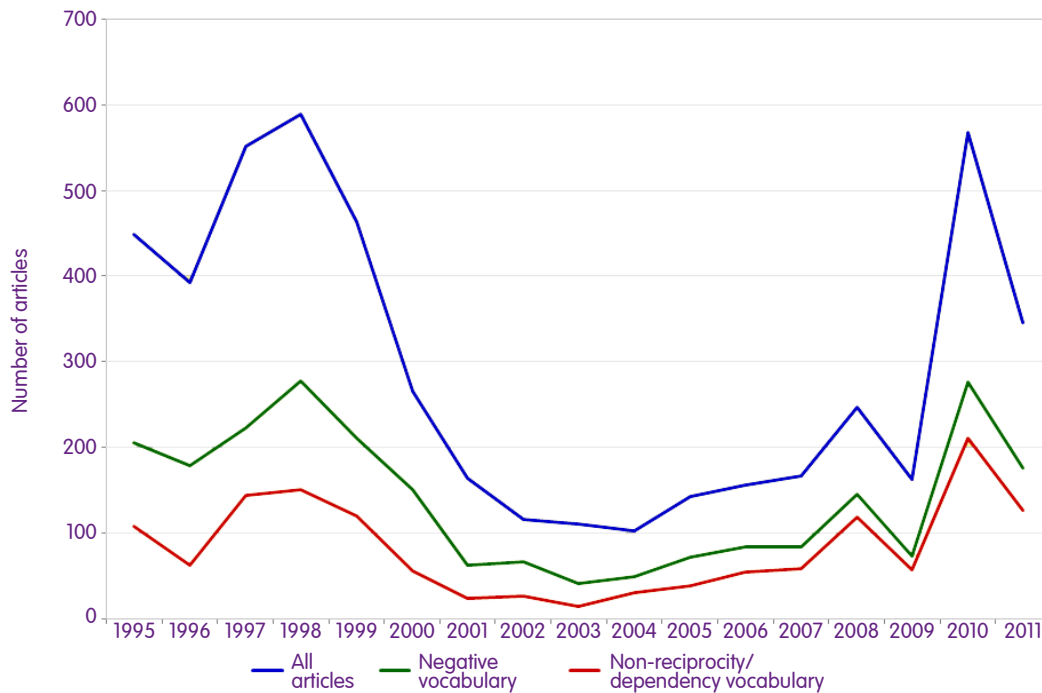
How has newspaper coverage of benefit claimants changed over time?

It is often suggested that newspaper coverage of benefit claimants has become more negative over time, and that this may be driving the trend we saw earlier towards people believing that a higher proportion of claimants are 'undeserving' (as we discuss further in the following chapter). At the same time, as newspaper editors themselves would argue, it is possible that changes in content and language reflect the changing views of readers. In the next chapter we look at the extent to which newspaper coverage may influence opinion independently of the pre-existing views of readers, but first we need to see whether coverage has in fact become more negative.

We do not have data for all titles over the entire period 1995–2011: the titles for which we do have consistent data are the [Guardian](#), [The Times](#), [Independent](#), [Mail](#), and [Mirror](#). We use these titles to construct a 'consistent' series to look at change over time. Note that there are two types of bias in this consistent series: it has only one red-top tabloid (the [Mirror](#)) and only one title that did not support the Labour party in at least one general election over the period. So there are anti-tabloid and political biases in this data which should be borne in mind.

The graph shows the number of articles in both series by year, together with the prevalence of negative vocabulary. The first thing to note is that there are two very big peaks in coverage; one in the late 1990s, and the second around 2010, as well as a smaller peak in 2008.

Figure 4: Negative vocabulary in newspaper articles on working age benefits: consistent titles, 1995–2011



It is obvious and hardly surprising that the number of articles using negative terms follows a similar trend to the total number of articles, peaking in the late 1990s and 2010. But the trends are not identical: while the 'negative' articles generally fall or rise with the total number of articles, they do not always change at the same rate. The pattern is not random: a rise in the **proportion** of non-negative articles happens in the two periods of the highest coverage in the late 1990s and 2010/11, although **not** during the smaller peak in 2008. The main reason is that there is more broadsheet coverage of benefits during these periods, and broadsheets tend to use negative terms somewhat less than tabloids. So during periods of intense coverage, the share of articles using negative terms tends to fall – although this did not happen in 2008/9.

So the belief that negative coverage has grown over recent years is not unfounded, if we look at coverage in terms of volume. That is not quite the same thing as saying that coverage has become more negative however! At the same time, the volume of negative coverage in 2010/11 is very similar to that at the previous major peak in the late 1990s. Put simply, we are not seeing unprecedentedly negative coverage (in terms of vocabulary) at the current time – but we are seeing a surge in negative stories compared to the previous 10 years.

Trends in the type of negative story about benefit claimants

Negative coverage of benefit claimants has therefore seen two peaks in terms of volume, in the late 1990s and in 2010. But there has also been a major change in the balance between different types of negative coverage, in terms of stories using the language of 'fraud' vs non-reciprocity. As shown in the figure below, 'non-reciprocity' increases over the period, with 'fraud' decreasing as a share of all negative coverage. Use of language around 'dependency' (not shown) has remained relatively stable over this period.

Figure 5: Fraud and non-reciprocity terms in newspaper articles on working age benefits 1995–2011



Something else which emerges from the chart is that in 2008, when there was a peak in coverage associated with Labour's third-term reforms and the Conservatives' developing 'Broken Britain' agenda, there was a leap in the number of articles using the non-reciprocity/lack of effort vocabulary, while there was really no significant change in stories referring to fraud: contrast the two other, much larger peaks in coverage in the series, where references to fraud increased substantially. Arguably this is a case of substitution, with 2008 marking a shift in the public discourse of welfare in the UK: whereas the main problematising theme in the late 1990s seems to have been fraud, which featured heavily in the political statements of both the main parties, from 2008 'scrounging' becomes the issue of choice⁵⁰.

Why has fraud become less important over time? Part of the answer comes from the policy process: the late 1990s saw what seems to have been a quite exceptional peak in references to fraud, which can be explained by the politics of welfare reform in Labour's first term in office. The welfare reform White Paper of 1998 – for which Frank Field had famously been invited to 'think the unthinkable' – was a damp squib: policies which had been widely canvassed since the preceding year's election fell victim to a land-grab of welfare policy by Gordon Brown's Treasury. The result was a White Paper for which expectations had been heavily stoked but which lacked any radical content. Tackling benefit fraud, which had featured in Labour's election manifesto, was the fallback policy and was given huge promotion in order to show that something was actually happening. Social security ministers can always get coverage for a new crackdown on benefit fraud, and that is what they tend to do when they have no other newsworthy policies to promote. (The converse does not hold, as we can see in 2010/11, when there was a peak in articles referring to fraud even though there was plenty of new policy as well.)

Finally we look at changes in the content of articles about benefits over time. For this, we can't present a time series as we are working from a 20% sample of articles which already represent only a fraction of the dataset (the consistent series), so we have divided the period covered by the consistent data series into two equal sub-periods, breaking at June 2003. As we are interested in stigma specifically, we concentrate on negative content.

⁵⁰ We analysed the series to see if compositional changes in the shares of different titles in our dataset might explain some of the change (as we have seen that the non-reciprocity vocabulary is more prevalent in some titles than others). The answer is no: within-title increases in the prevalence of this vocabulary were the overwhelming drivers.

The analysis of article content shows, not unexpectedly given the analysis of article vocabulary, that the proportion of all articles referring to fraud falls from 22 to 18 per cent, although this change is not statistically significant. We see more changes for the remaining 'negative' themes, which are grouped together as 'Other negative' in the table below. These themes include: large families/bad parenting/antisocial behaviour, compulsion, better off on benefits (than working/than average worker), never worked/hardly ever worked and 'shouldn't be claiming (reason other than fraud)'.

The proportion of articles containing **any** of these themes rises from 23% to 44%. There are increases in all of the themes with the exception, perhaps surprisingly, of 'better off on benefits'. Between the two periods newspapers became more likely to write about large families, bad parenting, antisocial behaviour, people who had never or hardly ever worked and people who allegedly should not be claiming (but who were not committing fraud). They also wrote much more about compulsion of claimants to work, take up training or perform some kind of community service.⁵¹

Table 12: Thematic variables % of all articles

Period	Other negative	Large families etc	Compulsion	Never worked etc	Better off	Shouldn't be claiming
Jan 1995–June 2003	23.1	3.4	12.0	3.2	4.4	3.1
June 2003–Dec 2011	43.8	7.3	20.8	9.2	6.2	11.4
Change	20.7	3.9	8.8	6.0	1.8	8.3
Significance (%)	99.0	95.0	99.0	99.0	N.S.	99.0

Data: manually coded sample 1995–2011

We can summarise the changes over the period 1995–2011 as:

- no definitive change in the overall level of negativity measured in terms of vocabulary
- newspapers became more likely to use a vocabulary of non-reciprocity/lack of effort in coverage of benefits from about 2008
- fraud remains a very important component of both language and content but has been less salient than non-reciprocity/lack of effort over recent years
- dividing the period 1995–2011 into two equal periods, newspapers were more likely in the second period to write about large families on benefits, bad parenting, antisocial behaviour, people who have never worked or haven't worked for a long time, compulsion of claimants and claimants who should not be claiming but who were not committing fraud.

Why do our results differ from other people's results?

Our results appear to differ from other recent research on the newspaper coverage of benefit claimants; in this section we explain why this is the case.

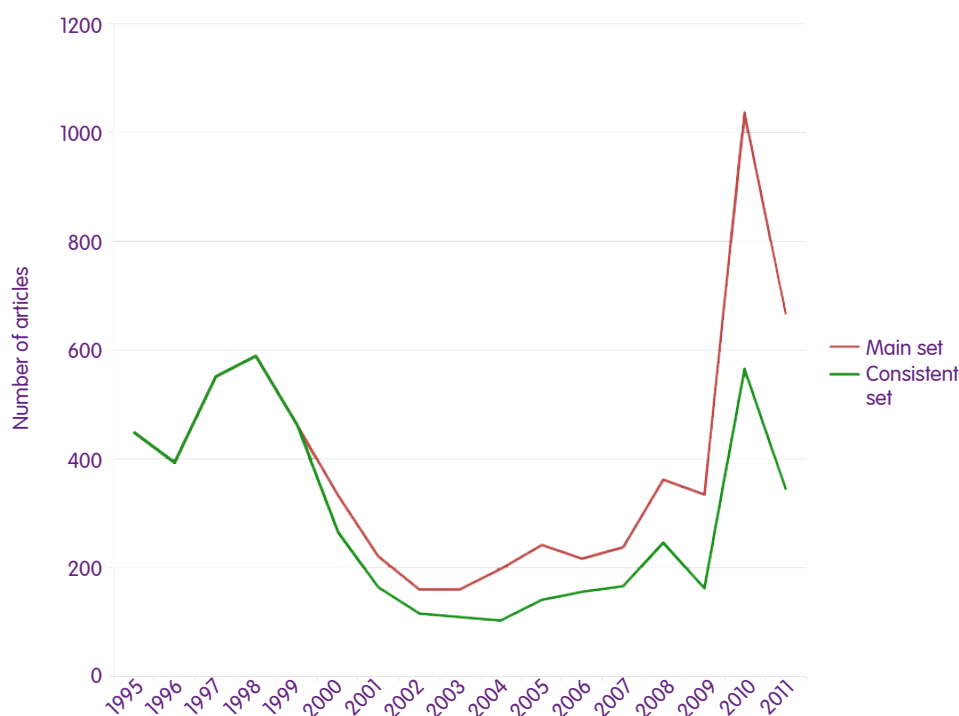
Firstly, two researchers have used the same source as us (Nexis) and shown that coverage is more negative today than at any point in the last twenty years (in fact, both researchers have

⁵¹ Does the increased policy emphasis on benefit conditionality in the second period explain the rise in the non-reciprocity vocabulary? No: the compulsion theme does not account for enough articles to explain the shift, and there is a rise in the use of this vocabulary within the set of articles about conditionality, as is also the case for articles using the other negative themes.

been involved in the present project in one form or another). Peter Taylor-Gooby (2012:10) in a Policy Network report finds that mentions of 'scrounger' are four times as high in 2010/11 as in any year 1993–2003, while Daniel Sage (2012:369) shows a similar pattern for 'scrounger' alongside similarly large rises in use of the terms 'benefit cheat' and (to a lesser extent) 'benefit fraud'.

There are two reasons why their conclusions differ from ours. The first is that trends in use of the word 'scrounger' do not capture all forms of negativity; it is particularly these terms around non-reciprocity and lack of effort that have become more common. Secondly, to create consistent trends, we need to account for the dates that different newspapers are added to the Nexis database.⁵² As the figure below shows, if we look at the number of articles about benefits without taking this into account then we seem to have many more articles than even the late 1990s, but if we restrict ourselves to newspapers that are consistently included in Nexis over the entire period then this is not the case.

Figure 6: Articles in main set and consistent set 1995–2011



Secondly, a report on the coverage of disabled people by the Glasgow Media Unit funded by the charity Inclusion London (Briant et al 2011) has been widely cited in policy debates and in news articles. This found an increase in the reporting of disability, a decline in articles describing disabled people in sympathetic/deserving terms or documenting real-life experiences of living as a disabled person, and rises in articles about benefit fraud (which doubled) and in 'pejorative language' like 'scrounger', 'cheat' and 'skiver' (from 12% to 18% of tabloid articles). Second-hand coverage of the report often claims that negative reporting increased almost fourfold, based on occurrences of the word 'handout'.

Briant et al's report is an invaluable complement to the analysis here, but some apparent differences come from selective reporting of their figures. In fact, alongside the rise in the reporting of fraud, they find a slight decline in the proportion of the more common articles where 'undeservingness' (other than fraud) is a major theme (although there was a rise in the absolute number of such articles; p39). This would seem to be consistent with the pattern we have identified, where the proportion of articles with negative vocabulary reduces during periods of more intense media coverage. More generally, Briant et al focus on the reporting of disability (rather than of all benefit claimants), and – crucially – compare Oct 2004–Jan 2005 with Oct 2010–Jan 2011. We likewise find sharp rises in the number of negative articles in this more recent period. But we can also go back further in time, which shows that similar negativity was also seen in the late 1990s.

⁵² The Nexis database also requires cleaning to remove duplicate and irrelevant articles.

Problematising welfare, stigmatising claimants?

So far we have looked at coverage in quantitative terms, measuring how many articles include various vocabularies and themes. But while it might be the case that the number or proportion of stories with negative content or language has an influence on stigma by influencing the public's estimates of fraud and other 'undeserving' characteristics, another possibility is that some specific stories have a disproportionate influence: an obvious example is stories about very high housing benefit payments in London, which seem not only to have been very widely circulated but even to have influenced government policy.

There are two aspects of news articles which seem likely to be important in influencing beliefs and attitudes (and thus stigma). These are the **memorability** of the story and its **problematising** potential. Memorability is easy to understand although less easy to define⁵³, while we can think of problematisation as having three levels:

1. At the ground level we have the bare facts of a news item, which suggest (usually) that something has gone wrong. In many cases, the story stays at level 1, simply reporting the newsworthy aspects of the situation.
2. At the next level up, the news item is contextualised in terms of other information (usually previous stories about what are claimed to be similar or related phenomena, or statistics which are claimed to be relevant) so that it becomes part of a pattern. Again, many stories remain at level 2.
3. At the highest level of problematisation, the story has become part of a critique of the social security system, the government or of society more generally, often as part of an argument for reform, and the pattern identified at level 2 is used to illustrate extremely general assertions.⁵⁴

We can illustrate the three levels of problematisation with a story from the **Daily Express**.⁵⁵ First there is the basic news content:

'A **JOBLESS** family of 11 on £42,000-a-year benefits caused outrage yesterday after they were given a new seven-bedroom house worth GBP 300,000... Stunned neighbours saw them carting their belongings – said to include prized parrots – out of their four-bedroom home to a bigger one just yards down the road.' (Remember those parrots, we'll be seeing them again).

The article contextualises this information with statistics (some of which are inaccurate) to show that this is an example of a pattern:

'Official figures this week revealed that 100,000 households are raking in handouts worth more than the wage earned by most workers. Shocking government statistics showed that some benefits families are pocketing £23,244 – the average UK salary – every year without lifting a finger.'

At level 3 the pattern is invoked to make a generalised claim – claimants are getting more money than 'taxpayers' so major reform with 'tough choices' is needed:

'Matthew Sinclair of the Taxpayers' Alliance said: 'It is shocking to see so many extreme cases like this of families abusing the welfare system. They are getting absurd amounts in benefits, far beyond the income of many ordinary working families. Taxpayers don't expect their money to be spent keeping scroungers in huge homes and allowing them to make extravagant purchases like luxury parrots. This kind of disgraceful waste of money is why we need serious reform of the

⁵³ But see Sperber (1990).

⁵⁴ This is of course a schematic account. It is more applicable to the discourse of a title than to individual articles: level 3 problematisation for example may take place in an associated editorial or opinion piece while levels 1 and 2 feature in a news article. The sequence of levels does not necessarily correspond in any way to the surface structure of individual articles: the headline or opening sentence often brings level 3 problematisation to bear straight away, explicitly or implicitly.

⁵⁵ 'Absurd! Family of 11 on GBP 42,000 benefits get new 7-bedroom house' **Daily Express** 10 August 2010

welfare system. The Government can't duck the tough choices that can reduce the cost to taxpayers and improve incentives to work.'

It is easy to pull this story apart and show that each of the moves from one level to the next is illegitimate: families this size on benefits are statistically rare (there are less than 200 in Britain)⁵⁶ so do not support claims about any sort of pattern, claimants and taxpayers are not mutually exclusive groups over any reasonable time-frame and who knows where the parrots came from anyway? But it is the argumentative structure of the article which is of interest here.

The reason this structure is important is that in some cases, including the example we have just seen, the process of generalisation involves the ascription of 'undeserving' characteristics to large numbers of claimants on the back of an incongruous example. We start from an individual case: the family is undeserving (if they were truly in need how could they afford those parrots?). The statistic then suggests that this is just one example of 100,000 undeserving families. If we think that one form of stigma is the propensity to ascribe undeserving characteristics in a probabilistic manner (e.g. one in four claimants is fraudulent, the median result from our survey) then the use of statistics in stories like this is clearly of interest.

Recurrent themes in stories about benefits

These issues of problematisation can be seen more widely in stories about benefit claimants. In general, human interest stories involve some element of incongruity (e.g. a former Catholic bishop has signed on), tenuous connections to celebrity (the sister of a pop star is accused of fraud) or, in the case of fraud stories, aggravating factors. These run-of-the-mill stories are not of interest here: but they shade off into stories which point to systematic problems and are thus open to level 2 or 3 contextualisation. For example, incongruity can take the form of a conflict between deception and publicity, as with people claiming while working in the entertainment industry (e.g. an actor in *Coronation Street*). Stories about people being 'caught' in fraudulent disability claims because of engaging in energetic public activities are common (a jiving competition, refereeing football matches, appearing on *The X Factor*). These stories were memorable enough to be repeatedly referred to by our focus groups, as we discuss in the following chapter.

Obviously stories about surprising cases of disability benefit fraud can be seen as implying the system is very open to abuse, even if the stories are published mainly for their entertainment value: if someone can get away with claiming while working as a television actor, suspicions about claimants in general or individual claimants in an area may well gain support. But in some cases, fraud stories are quite explicitly presented as showing systematic problems in the benefit system,⁵⁷ and a recurrent theme is that fraud is insufficiently punished.⁵⁸

Apart from fraud there are other types of human-interest story which recur frequently and are used to point to general conclusions about the benefit system. There is a genre of story which turns on the undeserving status of claimants combined with details of the amount they are receiving. These stories are not new, but they do seem to have become more important over recent years. They generally involve large families, presumably because the

56 As the *Daily Mail* reported in January 2012 'Figures released under the Freedom of Information Act show that there are 190 families with at least ten under-18s where one or both of the parents gets an out-of-work benefit.' <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2083998/Benefit-cap-190-families-10-children-cost-taxpayers-11m-A-YEAR.html>

57 For example, one memorable fraud story in the *Sun* in 2010 is used to support a specific coalition policy – the retesting of claimants of Disability Living Allowance: 'MORE than £1billion has been lost over the past six years due to fraud and error in payments of a disability benefit, according to official estimates. Some of the cash is disappearing because officials do not check whether thousands of people are as disabled as they claim ... The way in which claimants try to cheat the benefits system was highlighted by the case of Terence Read. The 61-year-old looked the picture of health as he twirled his partner around the dance floor during a jive competition. But at the same time, he was claiming Disability Living Allowance for severe arthritis, which he said left him virtually unable to walk. Unfortunately for Read, an informer had tipped off the Department for Work and Pensions and his deception was caught on film by an investigator.' 'Fraud and error add £1bn to disability benefit bill' *Sun* 24 August 2010

58 E.g. 'A scrounging woman who pocketed £75,000 in benefits by claiming that she was a penniless single mother while living with the father of her three children has provoked fury after she escaped a jail sentence.' (*Daily Express* 2008)

amounts that large families are entitled to are higher than for other claimant families.⁵⁹ Others concern men who have fathered several children with different partners: in these stories the benefits to which the mothers may be entitled are usually set out and added up to arrive at a total which is attributed to the father (in one case, a million pounds). These stories also often refer to housing⁶⁰ and often ascribe ingratitude to the claimant. 'Far from being grateful, Mrs Smith, 36, who has not worked in a decade, complains her home is not large enough and her family is not given enough financial help' (Express 2010).⁶¹

In all of these articles, level 2 or 3 generalisation is involved either in the body of the article or in an associated comment piece.

'Dr Adrian Rogers, from charity Family Focus, said: "These are the new millionaires of Britain. They don't appreciate what they cost to support. These sort of people are worse than scroungers because they are a burden to society, **driving up taxes to fund their own incompetent lifestyle**".' (Daily Express 2004, our emphasis).⁶²

Of course, statistics are not just used to contextualise human-interest stories. As we have seen, many stories are simply based on statistics, and recent years have seen an increase in this type of story. Two themes have been particularly important over recent years. The first concerns claimants receiving very high payments, as in this article from the *Telegraph*.⁶³

'TENS of thousands of families are eligible for benefits and tax credits that are worth more than the average Briton's salary, the government admitted yesterday. Some can claim almost £100,000 a year in housing benefit alone, according to a report by the Department for Work and Pensions. Iain Duncan Smith, the Welfare and Pensions Secretary, said the generosity of the benefits system meant that claimants regarded those who worked as "bloody morons".'

In fact the statistics here are carefully constructed, and the journalist avoids saying that claimants are actually *receiving* these amounts. An FOI request in July 2011 for the *Telegraph* found a total of five families in accommodation costing the highest eligible amount for housing benefit, all in Westminster.⁶⁴ In all cases we have seen where claimants are said to be receiving more than the 'average' worker the comparison has involved ignoring in-work entitlements of working households (thus comparing some of the income of working families with all of the income of non-working families) or comparing families of different sizes.⁶⁵

The second concerns the proportion of incapacity benefit claimants who are held to be able to work, with stories since at least 2004 claiming that this proportion is somewhere between 2 in 3 and 4 in 5 claimants. (It is striking that the proportions vary very little even if the statistics are based on quite different types of data). The statistics which are used in these stories are often reported misleadingly as if they referred to claimants who would be able to work immediately, or even to fraudulent claims, when in fact they include people who may be able to return to work at some point in the future but not at present. Thus on 11 February 2011, no fewer than four titles ran headlines asserting that two thirds of claimants were 'fit for work'. The Sun even suggested in its headline that the figures concerned fraud: 'Fit as a fiddler. A SHOCKING 1.8 million people claiming incapacity benefit are FIT to work, figures reveal today.'⁶⁶

The underlying data for the stories published in February 2011 concerned reassessment of incapacity benefit claimants in two pilot areas, and showed that 71% had *not* been found fit for work. The coverage simply confounded the two categories of 'fit for work' and 'capable of some work-related activity': claimants in the latter group had, by definition, *not* been found fit for work.

59 Another common feature of large families stories is that while the disability status of family members is not always mentioned, there is usually a disability benefit listed among the benefits the family receives.

60 E.g. 'Jobless Booth... wants a bigger council house for his wife, ex-mistress and 11 kids ('A Scrounger and a liar' *Mirror* 14 April 1998).

61 'Scroungers on £95,000 a year' *Daily Express* 6 September 2010

62 'Gimme more cash says scrounger mum' *Daily Express* 15 March 2004

63 'Families on £100,000 a year in benefits', *Daily Telegraph* 28 May 2010

64 <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/8614246/Some-families-still-receiving-100000-a-year-in-housing-benefit-latest-figures-reveal.html>

65 <http://lartsocial.org/fairness>

66 http://fullfact.org/factchecks/incapacity_benefit_fit_to_work-2494

Overall, there is a very limited repertoire of negative themes concerning claimants present in negative stories, and with the exception of straightforward reporting of fraud cases, these themes tend to be deployed in an argumentative manner. Whether the story concerns an individual case or a statistic, it is offered as evidence for one or more of these general conclusions: huge numbers are claiming fraudulently; people are better off on benefits than working; money is given out without checking eligibility and with no conditions attached; many claimants 'prefer' living on benefits because they have different norms to the rest of society. These are very general and somewhat abstract themes in the problematisation of social security, but in human interest stories they are dramatised through the presentation of what are held to be extreme examples of common phenomena, and statistics which are not related to these assertions are frequently presented in a misleading manner to back them up – to turn an anecdote into a pattern; thus one of the paradoxical features of public discourse on benefits – is that cases which are almost by definition atypical and statistically rare are used as evidence for very general assertions about claimants.

5. Explaining benefits stigma

We consider three main explanations for the stigma of claiming benefits – personal experience of claimants, the impact of media coverage, and the structure of the benefits system.

A lot of people have claimed that the negative media coverage shown in the last chapter is responsible for increases in benefit stigma – but others have given good reasons to contest this. We therefore tested the link in three ways. Firstly, we found that people who read more stigmatising newspapers perceived higher levels of fraud and reported more personal stigma. Secondly, we were able to take into account other factors that are associated with newspaper readership, and still found a link of newspaper coverage with perceived deservingness. Finally, we randomly primed some people in our survey to think about fraud, and found these people reported higher levels of self-stigma. All of this suggests that there is a genuine link between negative media coverage and stigma – although we can only fully appreciate the media's impact when we consider its inter-relationship with people's everyday experiences.

The relationship of personal experience to stigma is complex:

- **'Seeing undeservingness'**: people living in neighbourhoods with more benefit claimants perceive more fraud and report more self-stigma – but this is only true if they are inclined to view benefit claimants negatively (perhaps because of media portrayals). Given that the deservingness of benefit claimants is often hidden, people who already stigmatise benefits claimants may be more likely to 'see undeservingness' and to see these people as typical.
- **'Self esteem and resentment'**: people in low social grades and with low education attach more stigma to claiming benefits, which may partly be because of 'seeing undeservingness', but may also be a way for low-status people to enhance their own self-identity, and/or a displacement of people's financial worries.
- **'Empathy'**: there is no sign here that knowing claimants reduces stigma or perceived fraud – but this may be because we have no direct measures of how many claimants people know, and how well they know them.
- **'Dependency culture'**: benefits claimants report lower stigma than non-claimants, as we would expect given the evidence on take-up that we discuss below in chapter 6. However, both claimants and non-claimants alike overwhelmingly reject the idea that people should be ashamed to claim benefit, and there is no evidence that people in areas of high benefit claims feel any less stigma (indeed, the reverse is true; see under 'seeing undeservingness'). There is therefore no support for most of the predictions of the 'dependency culture' thesis.

Finally, British people seem **less** likely than people in other countries to stigmatise claiming per se – but are **more** likely to see claimants as undeserving, and UK newspapers report more stories about undeservingness than Sweden or Denmark. This may partly be due to the design of the benefits system, with means-tested systems tending to 'open up' questions of desert compared to more universal, contributory systems.

In the previous chapter we looked at the portrayal of benefit claimants in British newspapers; in this chapter we look at whether such coverage influences benefits stigma. We also set the role of the media alongside two other possible influences: personal experience (both 'dependency culture' and meeting real benefits claimants in everyday life), and the impact of the structure of the benefits system itself.

The impact of media coverage

It is not new to claim that the media plays a key role in perpetuating the stigma of benefits claimants (Gilens 1999, cited by Golding and Middleton 1982; Page 1984:40; Stuber and Schlesinger 2006), but these claims have become ever louder in recent years – particularly

around the portrayal of disability benefit claimants. The idea that the media is responsible for rising levels of stigma can be found among academics (Dorey 2010; Sage 2012), in major national newspapers,⁶⁷ among politicians,⁶⁸ disability charities,⁶⁹ and the overwhelming majority of disabled people.⁷⁰ It is therefore no surprise to find such views among our focus group participants:

Yasmin: I think there's a kind of general campaign in the press to blacken us (Disability benefits group).

Jim: Something like the Jeremy Kyle Show plays its part as well. I'm not saying everyone on it is a misunderstood, you know, innocent type, but obviously they dig out some pretty awful people. But lots of people watch it and think everyone's like that (JSA group).

However, the impact the media has on benefits stigma can be debated. It might be that people's attitudes reflect a worldview rather than a considered look at the facts – and even if they are looking for the facts, we tend to deliberately search out information that agrees with whatever we wanted to believe to begin with (as suggested by Druckman et al 2012). Moreover, 21st-century Britons are not naïve media consumers; the people we spoke to knew the different agendas of different media sources.

Jim: I don't know why I was amazed recently when I found out that [Jeremy Kyle] voted Tory in the last election coz it seems obvious to me now because all he ever does is get on dole scum and abuse them verbally, you know (JSA group).

Sarah: The Guardian, through all this 'Hardest Hit' campaigning that's been going on over the last two years with respect to the new Welfare Reform Bill, they have been backing disabled people, legitimately disabled people, the whole way (Disability benefits group).

From our initial analysis of the discourse around benefits in the last chapter, we here take the next step of looking at the evidence that these media portrayals are contributing to stigma.

67 This primarily includes the *Guardian* (e.g. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2012/aug/14/disability-hate-crime-benefit-scrounger-abuse?cat=society&type=article>) and the *Independent* (e.g. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/hate-crimes-against-disabled-people-soar-to-a-record-level-7858841.html>).

68 See <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-15863589> and <http://blogs.independent.co.uk/2012/08/03/its-not-the-benefit-fraudsters-who-are-targeted-in-the-media-its-the-disabled/>

69 See <http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2012/feb/05/benefit-cuts-fuelling-abuse-disabled-people?newsfeed=true> and <http://www.scope.org.uk/news/discrimination>

70 In a recent poll (ComRes for Scope Nov/Dec 2011), 75% of disabled people felt that 'negative media coverage around people receiving disability benefits' was having a very negative effect on public attitudes towards disabled people. Individual disabled people have also drawn attention to this; for relevant posts on two of the most widely read blogs, see <http://benefitscroungingscum.blogspot.co.uk/2011/12/deathwalk-movie.html> and <http://wheresthebenefit.blogspot.co.uk/2011/02/hate-from-government-hate-on-street.html>

Why might the media influence benefits stigma?

A simplistic account of media impacts would be to assert that people parrot what they see in the media; newspapers are hostile to benefit claimants, ergo the public are too. But there are three more plausible and more complex mechanisms than this.

Firstly, the media may influence people's beliefs about benefits claimants. Some stories make explicit statements about the proportion of claimants that are undeserving, which we described in the last chapter as turning a newsworthy event into a pattern. But the influence may also be due to the balance of stories about deserving and undeserving claimants; 'if [fraud] is all you ever hear then people start to think it's a lot more common than it is', as one participant in our JSA group put it. In previous chapters we have seen that (i) people wildly overestimate the level of benefits fraud (Chapter 3), and (ii) fraud is a dominant theme in the media representation of benefits claimants despite it being relatively uncommon (Chapter 5), which is at least suggestive of a link between the two. Other beliefs about benefits (e.g. that benefit levels are high, and therefore recipients are not in need) are likewise found in both the newspaper coverage and in our focus groups.

Secondly, beyond people's specific factual beliefs, the media may influence how people instinctively think about an issue. Research on media impacts has found that the media can influence how people think per se ('framing effects') and also, out of the various ways of thinking that people already hold, which of these comes to mind most easily ('priming effects'). For example, Slothuus (2007) found that different framings about a benefits change (giving only the view of either its proponents or opponents) influenced both the perceived deservingness of claimants and the level of support that people gave to the policy.

Given the frequency with which the media talks about undeservingness – an August 2010 study for Scope found that the majority of people say they have seen a story on benefits fraud *in the last two months*⁷¹ – it is plausible that media coverage prompts people to think about the negative rather than positive aspects of the benefits system, particularly when stories explicitly link newsworthy events to criticisms of the system as a whole. But aside from the basic frequency of these stories, some are also *memorable*, which may give them disproportionate impact. In our focus groups, we saw how easily particular stories about fraud came to mind:

Belinda: you hear a lot of stories these days, you know the people...

Donna: and they're filmed aren't they on the golf course

Belinda:... that they're a referee at a football match or something
(Non-claimant group).

Yasmin: And you get the scaffolder who's getting Disability Living Allowance and still carrying on with putting up scaffolds and stuff, and the film that they've taken
(Disability benefits group).

Third, even if people's own opinions are unchanged, media coverage may make us think that *other people* stigmatise benefits claimants. This might be because we all generally believe other people's views are more affected by negative media coverage than our own (what Lasorsa 1992 calls the 'third person effect'), or because we take media stories to be a proxy for what other people think (a habit that is possibly unfairly associated with politicians). The evidence in Chapter 2 suggests this happens; levels of personal stigma (the respondent's own view) were noticeably lower than levels of social stigma (their perception of others' views).

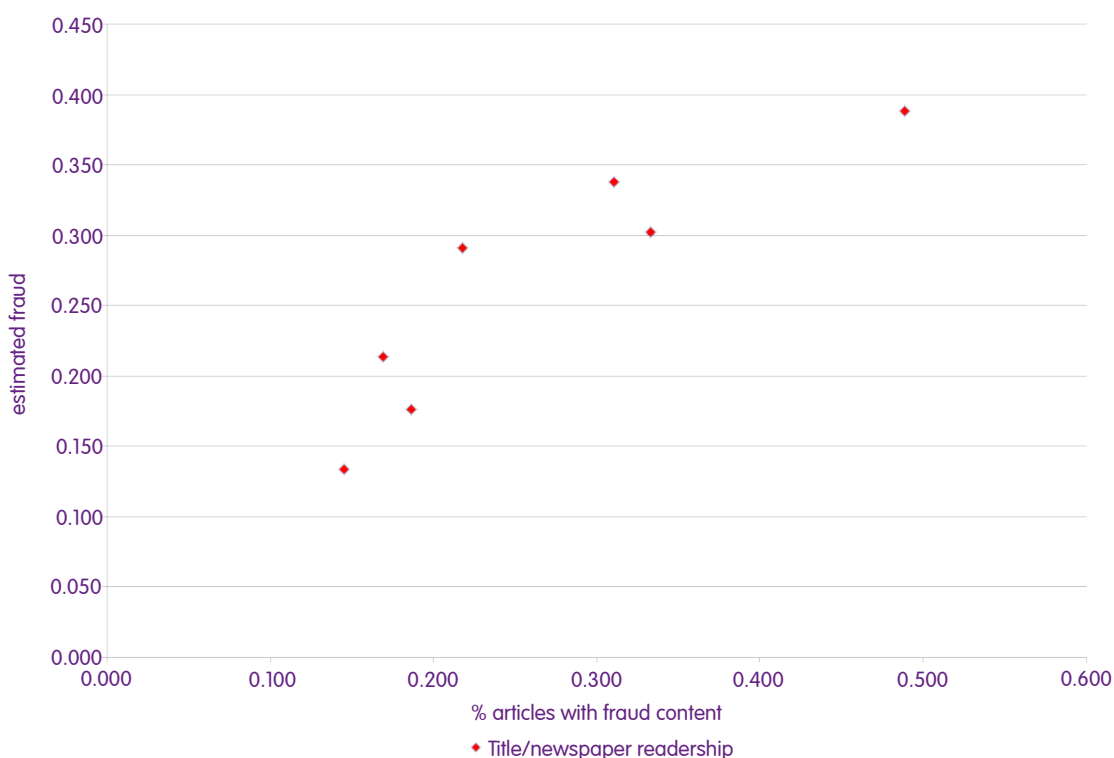
⁷¹ ComRes poll for Scope, Aug 2010.

Testing if the media influence benefits stigma

We therefore have good theoretical reasons for thinking that the media discourse analysed in the previous chapter contributes to benefits stigma. In the wider debates about the impact of the media, there is also good evidence that the media influences both beliefs and attitudes.⁷² But given that there is little evidence directly on attitudes to benefits, we tested whether the media influences benefits stigma in three ways. (Technical details on all of the tests are provided in the Appendices to the report).

We first directly tested whether people who read more hostile coverage of benefits claimants in newspapers reported higher benefits stigma. To do this, we merged the data from the media review into the MORI survey, using information on the newspapers that people read regularly. The chart below shows that estimated fraud is higher among readers of newspapers that give more news coverage to benefits fraud.

Figure 7: Newspaper readership, fraud content of news stories and estimated fraud



However, there are obviously lots of other differences between readers of different newspapers in terms of their education, age, class etc, so we then investigated the effect of newspaper coverage after taking these other factors into account. We here look primarily at whether newspapers represent claimants negatively (rather than as fraudulent), which we term '(more or less) stigmatising newspapers'. We found that people who read more stigmatising newspapers perceive more fraud and report higher personal stigma, although on all other stigma-related measures those reading less stigmatising newspapers were the same (social stigma, institutional stigma, stigma-related take-up). However, even after taking these factors into account, people who read different newspapers are likely to be different from each other, and the data do not allow us to control for all of these differences – particularly not the wider political attitudes that we suspect are important.

⁷² When issues are covered in the news then people's knowledge of that issue increases (Doms and Morin 2004; Barabas and Jerit 2010) – although people's knowledge is best if something is both in the news and supports their political beliefs (Jerit and Barabas In Press). Changes in local newspaper coverage of an issue can change our perceptions of others' opinions even when our own opinions are unchanged (Mutz and Soss 1997). And US studies looking at random variations in either newspaper readership (Gerber et al 2009) or Fox News availability (Della Vigna and Kaplan 2007) found these influenced which party people voted for.

To try and overcome this, we used the 2007 British Social Attitudes survey, which enables us to compare differences in newspaper readership while controlling for other political attitudes. Because this dataset does not include an explicit question on benefits stigma, we instead looked at perceived fraud (as described in Chapter 3), and again merged in data on which newspapers were most stigmatising. In similar fashion to the first test, people who read stigmatising newspapers also perceive benefits fraud as higher. What is more, this is still the case when we simultaneously control for two key aspects of non-benefits-related political preferences (attitudes to redistribution, and libertarianism vs. authoritarianism).

Still, there remains a possibility that people who think benefits claiming is shameful then choose to read stigmatising newspapers (or that newspapers simply respond to the views of their readers), rather than the newspapers themselves influencing stigma. To try and test the link as robustly as possible, we designed our MORI survey to include an experiment: some people were asked about benefit fraud at the start of the questionnaire (the 'fraud prime group'), while others were only asked at the end (the 'control group'). The goal was to prompt the fraud prime group to think about fraud when answering, in an attempt to mirror the primes that people will get from a stigmatising media source. We expected our experiment to be relatively weak: we did not present people with the type of strongly worded article that was found in newspapers; we did not present people with any 'true answers' (which was the only manipulation that was effective in Kuklinski et al 2000); we did not repeat this over a period of months to imitate regular readership – our manipulation was simply to ask people how common they thought benefit fraud was before asking them about stigma.⁷³ If we found an effect from the experiment, we reasoned, this was strong evidence that media coverage is likely to have an impact.⁷⁴

The results from our experiment are shown below in Figure 4. This shows that there was a marginally significant⁷⁵ impact of the fraud prime on personal stigma for those benefits that were seen as least stigmatised (for incapacity benefits and tax credits), and a non-significant rise in the other forms of stigma. There was also a fall in institutional stigma – if we remember that people justify institutional stigma through personal stigma, then this is further support that being primed to think about fraud raises levels of personal stigma. These impacts are relatively small (0.05–0.20 points on a 0–10 scale), but as we already said, this is a relatively weak way of trying to influence people, and the surprise is rather that we find any impact at all.⁷⁶

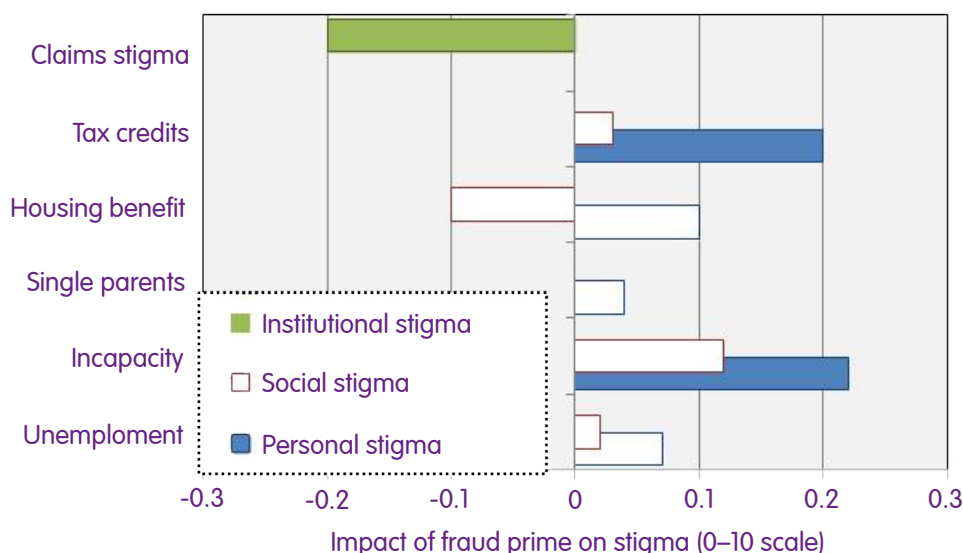
73 The actual question wording was, 'The government release figures on the amount of 'benefit fraud' – where some people deliberately deceive the government, as they would not be entitled to benefits if they told the truth. Out of every 100 people claiming out-of-work benefits, how many, if any, would you say, commit fraud in this way?'

74 We should bear in mind that in real life there are (i) longer delays between frames and asking people's attitudes, and (ii) multiple competing frames, both of which create uncertainty generalising from survey experiments to real life (Barabas and Jerit 2010).

75 The main results were significant at the 10% level; the results for felt stigma become significant at the 5% level if either (i) we do a 'one-tailed test', i.e. we explicitly test our hypothesis that fraud primes increase stigma; rather than testing if fraud primes *either* increase or decrease stigma; or (ii) we use unweighted analyses, which are equally valid to understand the effect of the prime in the sample, but which are harder to generalise to the wider population.

76 There was neither a consistent nor statistically significant impact on social stigma, mirroring the lack of association of social stigma with stigmatising newspaper readership above.

Figure 8: Impact of a fraud prime on different types of stigma



Source: commissioned MORI survey May 2012. Filled bars are significant at the 10% level, empty bars are non-significant.

Does this mean that the rising stigma seen in Chapter 3 is partly due to an increasingly negative media portrayal of benefits claimants? The answer here is ‘probably yes’, but we should remember that media negativity is not unprecedentedly high at the current time; a similar peak of hostility was seen in the 1990s, around the time that most measures of perceived undeservingness sharply increased. Yet following this peak, attitudes did not go back to their earlier level. This is particularly surprising as, even in the absence of an impact of coverage on attitudes, we would expect changes in public attitudes to feed back in turn into newspaper coverage. It seems most likely that once people’s attitudes are changed they become self-sustaining due to the way that people interpret their personal experiences (with occasional ‘topping-up’ from more recent coverage, and obviously subject to challenge if coverage changes once more). This would fit with the more complex interactions between media effects and personal experience that we discuss below.

In conclusion, there is consistent evidence from three different tests that stigmatising newspaper coverage is likely to raise personal stigma. (In fact there is further evidence from a fourth test below, which we discuss when looking at whether personal experience influences stigma). Combined with the evidence presented so far in the report, this suggests that one of the reasons that benefits stigma has risen in Britain is the negative representation of benefit claimants in the media.

Personal experience: deservingness and ‘dependency culture’

While the media has been the most widely cited cause of stigmatising attitudes, it is clear that other factors are also at work here: ‘the image of claimants as social parasites was evident long before the press became a major factor influencing opinions; the rejection of the dependent poor goes much deeper’ (Spicker 1984:91) (see also Golding and Middleton 1982). Today when the press or politicians are blamed for stoking anti-claimant sentiment, they sometimes say these feelings are rooted in the daily experiences of people across Britain. Matt Oakley, Head of Social Policy at the centre-right think-tank Policy Exchange, puts it like this:

‘[In recent focus groups] the key thing was that people were getting very upset [was]... the person next door to them (or next door to that)... they were just living off the state, they were seen not to have been contributing as much as they should have been. Whether that’s right or wrong, that’s the view of the public and that’s

what they see. **It's not informed by politicians or the Daily Mail, it's informed by what they see in real life'** [emphasis added]⁷⁷

This is echoed in Golding & Middleton (Golding and Middleton:172-3), where twice as many people justified their perception of scroungers using personal observation than the media. More recently, based on a series of focus groups, an influential report on the media and disability commissioned by Inclusion London found that '**all those we spoke to claimed to have first-hand knowledge of people who were fraudulently claiming benefit**' (Briant et al 2011:64). And we heard similar tales in our focus groups, including from benefits claimants themselves (see Chapter 3), with these stories sometimes first-hand and sometimes second-hand:

Donna: I know a man, he's now retired. Well retired, he's never lifted a finger in his life, has nine kids and is depending on the state for everything, two wives, nine kids, two homes, all supported by the state, and he brags about it (Non-claimant group).

Hussein: My sister, erm, works in a jobcentre, and, er, she gets the single parents coming in to sign, and she says, 'they come in with their mobile phones and their jewellery and I look at them and I think, well I know you're claiming as a single parent with a child but I know you're living with your boyfriend, but I cannot prove it.' (JSA group).

My friend, they said why we go to work? If we work more and they take more money, something like that, better to stay home, not go to work and get some benefit or anything like this, you know? (mixed claimant and non-claimant group).

If this kind of experience is driving perceptions of undeservingness, then we would expect stigma and perceived undeservingness to be highest in areas of high benefit claims, and among those groups who are more likely to know benefit claimants.

The idea that benefits stigma is rooted in literally seeing undeservingness is powerful – but there are at least three competing accounts of how personal experience relates to stigma.

1. As well as perceiving undeserving claimants, many people in our focus groups reported experiences of knowing deserving claimants (mirroring the split in people's attitudes reported in Chapter 3). Even in the non-claiming group – and beyond the husband of one focus group participant who had accompanied her to the group! – we heard about the university friend of one participant and the son of another, both of whom had been unemployed; and about friends who were unable to work more than part-time, or who had experienced injury or illness (such as the roofer in Chapter 3):

Anne: Can I just say something about **a different kind of claiming benefits?** I mean I do know somebody who has rheumatoid arthritis, so it comes and it goes, so he gets up in the morning and he can walk, and he gets up in the morning another day and he can't walk. So he works when he can and he doesn't work when he can't, but the benefits system make it really difficult to be in and out of work like that [Non-claiming group, emphasis added].

This could reduce stigma and perceptions of undeservingness in various ways. Clearly, knowing a claimant who is perceived to be deserving could make people think that deserving claimants are more common. But beyond this, we know people only have a poor understanding of the reality of the benefits system, and knowing – or indeed, being – a person on benefits may help provide a more accurate picture. It also helps people to empathise with the personal and societal barriers that lead people to claim benefits; and it provides an additional motive for people to interpret issues around benefits more positively.

In this way, personal experiences may help people challenge media portrayals of the benefits system, and this can be seen in some respondents in qualitative

⁷⁷ Taken from a public webinar organised by the TUC; see 44 minutes into <http://touchstoneblog.org.uk/2012/05/live-webinar-making-a-contribution-social-security-for-the-future/>

research (Philo 2001, cited by McKendrick et al 2008:52 as well as McKendrick's own research; Briant et al 2011:62). This may be particularly important for close relationships rather than just casual acquaintances, as illustrated by this discussion in our ESA group:

Tricia: I don't think everybody has that sort of attitude to people on benefits, though, because a few of my friends know I'm on benefits and they don't. Well, they haven't said anything to me about it, made me aware that having that attitude—

Sarah: But they're not going to, because they're aware of how your disability impacts on you. This, you see, we're talking about general public, who have no idea how disability impacts on a particular person—

Tricia: But my friends are part of the general public—

Sarah: Yeah, but they know you. They know what your disability is and they know how it affects you... it's those that don't know that are labelling us (Disability Benefits group).

Being around claimants may therefore mean personal stigma and perceived undeservingness are lower among benefit claimants, in areas of high benefit claims, and among those groups who are more likely to know benefit claimants – exactly the opposite predictions of the 'I see scroungers down the pub' argument. But this empathy may also draw attention to the stigmatising attitudes of others, and may raise social stigma at the same time as lowering self-stigma.

2. A common theme in discussions of benefits in Britain is that there is a 'dependency culture', a culture that does not stigmatise claiming benefits. Certainly those claiming benefits are likely to have lower stigma than others; those with higher levels of stigma are simply less likely to claim. But the dependency culture hypothesis also suggests that those around claimants – their families, their friends, even their neighbours – will also attach less stigma to claiming benefits. For example, American commentator Charles Murray has argued that the values of the British underclass 'are now contaminating the life of entire neighbourhoods—which is one of the most insidious aspects of the phenomenon, for neighbours who don't share those values cannot isolate themselves' (Murray 1990/1996:26). Ignoring Murray's polemical language, there is suggestive evidence that benefits will be less stigmatised in areas of high claims,⁷⁸ and it was mentioned (if not a dominant theme) in our focus groups, particularly by non-claimants, as an explanation for differing attitudes towards benefits:

Belinda: If you're brought up in a family that has claimed benefits, and then you want to claim benefits, I don't think you're going to be likely to care too much about what people think about the stigma attached. Whereas if you're brought up in a family that are very hard-working, and have kind of instilled in you that you should work for what you have, and if you want something you work for it, then I think the stigma of benefits is going to affect them a lot more (Non-claimant group).

3. Finally, experience may be irrelevant – people may instead stigmatise claimants due to other psychological needs and biases. People who are frustrated by the mismatch between their expectations and the reality of life may displace their resentments onto others, usually the people around them rather than distant others (Hoggett 2012); we know that deservingness judgments are emotional as much as intellectual (Bang Petersen et al 2012). People in unsatisfying low-status jobs may stigmatise benefits as a post-hoc rationalisation of the fact that they are working despite the daily challenges to their self-respect at work and the availability of benefits that would enable them to leave or quit (the only explanation for which may be that benefits are stigmatised and should be avoided, in a version of Festinger's classic theory of cognitive dissonance). Those in low-status jobs may stigmatise benefit claimants as a way of enhancing their own self-esteem (psychologists sometimes talk about the role of self-enhancement motivations in identity; see Alicke and Sedikides 2009; van den Bos and Stapel 2009), and this may be particularly

⁷⁸ This includes qualitative studies where some single parents suggest there is less stigma where lone parenthood is more common (Yardley 2008:678), and quantitative evidence that unemployment makes people less unhappy when there are more other unemployed people in the same area (Clark 2003).

important for those near to the bottom of the social hierarchy (what Kuziemko et al (2011) call 'last place aversion'). Finally, we suggested in chapter 4 that claimants often distinguish themselves from other, undeserving claimants; and that claimants of one benefit may adopt stigmatising attitudes towards other claimant types as a coping mechanism for dealing with the stigma that they themselves see directed at them. While these may be forms of last place aversion, they may also reflect the greater possibility that someone could be considered an undeserving claimant, which may enhance self-enhancement motivations to stigmatise other claimants.

The desire to draw strong distinctions between those on low incomes and those on benefits also came up occasionally in our focus groups: while there was some recognition that benefit levels could lead to participants living in hardship, the idea that benefit levels enabled a better lifestyle than that enjoyed by people in paid employment helped fuel accusations of undeservingness:

Belinda: I know people that work so many hours a week and find it hard and stress about work, and they can't afford Sky, or kind of top model phone, and yet there's people that aren't working that are claiming benefit and they've got the top luxuries (Non-claimant group).

Graham: Before me and my ex split up, there was a disabled couple living behind us, erm, at the time me and my other half were on 75 a year between us. And we changed our car every three years, we had two, had a little runaround to get to work, she had the good car. And there was a disabled couple behind that got every single benefit under the sun yeah, and they had a new car every year because of the erm, mobility. And they lived on a better lifestyle than us, and I was working a flat week of 60 hours my wife at the time was working in the NHS, in fact she still is, but she would work, she would do a 45, 45 hour week as standard, and then do 20 hour week on call so between we were working 120 hours a week and we weren't living the lifestyle that they were living (JSA group).

This partly reflects the criteria of 'need' that we discussed in Chapter 3: by virtue of the sums that people were perceived to be claiming, they were no longer seen as needy. But this seemed to become particularly problematic when allied to a feeling of frustration about people's own living standards. Hence those with financial worries – possibly including claimants – may be more likely to stigmatise *other people* who claim benefits.

The impact of personal experience on stigma & perceived deservingness

In the midst of so many contradictory possibilities, empirical evidence is critical. We therefore looked at how stigma and perceived fraud varied according to (i) people's own benefit claims; (ii) socioeconomic status; and (iii) levels of benefit claims in people's local area. To our knowledge, this report is the first to consider whether local benefit receipt influences attitudes to benefit claimants.⁷⁹ Once we have seen the evidence on all three, we can then start to see which of the theories above seem strongest.

Turning first to people's own benefit claims, stigma among benefit claimants is lower than among non-claimants. The biggest gap is for Jobseeker's Allowance, where 20% of claimants report some personal stigma compared to 30% of non-claimants; and the smallest is for Income Support for single parents, where personal stigma is reported by 29% of claimants and 32% of non-claimants. When we take into account the other differences between claimants and non-claimants, then claimants agree about $\frac{3}{4}$ point less on a 0–10 scale that people should feel ashamed to claim their benefit.⁸⁰ This was only true for self-stigma however; there were no differences in any of perceived fraud, social stigma or institutional stigma. And confusingly, while claimants overall were less likely to report stigma-related

⁷⁹ It is almost the first to consider whether any aspect of local context influences attitudes to the deservingness of benefit claimants – but readers are directed to a fascinating recently completed ESRC project led by Nick Bailey at Glasgow.

⁸⁰ This is for out-of-work benefit claimants; for claimants of other benefits this was about $\frac{1}{2}$ point. Those claiming in-work tax credits reported lower stigma for out-of-work benefits as well as tax credits. (Note some claimants claimed multiple types of benefits/tax credits).

reasons to delay/avoid taking up benefits, this effect largely disappeared when we took into account the wider differences between claimants and non-claimants (e.g. in age and education).⁸¹

Overall, benefits claimants are slightly less likely to report personal stigma than non-claimants – but overwhelming majorities of claimants and non-claimants alike do not think that people should feel ashamed to claim, and there is no noticeable difference in people's reported willingness to take up benefits if they needed them.

After accounting for people's own benefit claims, the social patterning of stigma is shown in Table 6, showing four key dimensions of socioeconomic status across all of our measures. Looking first at the direct measures of desert and stigma (in blue and green), we can see that lower socioeconomic groups perceive more benefits fraud and report more self-stigma. These effects are large, such that a person in the lowest social grade with no qualifications – compared to someone in the highest grade with a degree – perceives 15–20 more fraudulent claimants in every 100, and reports 1½ points more agreement on a 0–10 scale that people should feel ashamed to claim benefits. However, despite the size of these effects, this does not translate to any difference in the reported willingness to claim benefits.

Table 13: Social patterning of different measures of stigma

	Desert	Stigma			Non-take-up			
	Fraud	Felt	Social	Claims	Felt	Social	Claims	Non-stigma
Low Social Grade		↑	↑					
Low qualifications	↑	↑						
Non-working status						↓		↓
Social housing			↓		↓			

Source: commissioned MORI survey May 2012. Notes: dark shaded boxes indicate patterns significant at the 5% level; lighter boxes show those significant at the 10% level. Models are simultaneously adjusted for the other measures of socioeconomic status plus other factors; for further details of regression models see Appendices.

The impact of other social factors is more mixed. People in social housing are less likely to believe that other people view benefit claiming as shameful (although equally likely themselves to say people should feel ashamed), and are also less likely to say they would not claim benefits because of personal stigma (which includes 'thinking they're for other people, not people like me'). The effect of social housing is not that large however, so that a person in social housing in the lowest social grade still reports more social stigma than a person who owns their own home in the highest social grade.

There are also signs that people out of work are less likely to delay/avoid claiming benefits for social stigma-related and particularly non-stigma-related reasons. Yet there was no sign that working people had different views on stigma itself compared to those not working (taking into account the aforementioned differences in whether people actually claimed benefits).

The newest part of our analysis looks at whether stigma is different **in areas where more people claim benefits**. To do this, we attached data on people's 'neighbourhoods' – technically lower-level super output areas, whose average size is about 1,000 working-age people – to the 2007 British Social Attitudes survey, which investigated people's perceptions

⁸¹ The only difference remaining was that claimants of out-of-work benefits were less likely to report social stigma as a reason to delay/avoid claiming benefits (at the 10% significance level). There were greater differences between benefits claimants and others when it came to their willingness to claim tax credits.

of false unemployment and disability claims. This found that people in neighbourhoods with more incapacity claimants perceive a greater proportion of false disability/sickness claims, at a rate of about 1 percentage point more false claims (in every 100 claimants) per 3–4 percentage point more claimants in the neighbourhood.⁸² In other words, people perceive that the rate of false claims for disability benefits is 2–3% higher in an area where 10 in 100 people claim incapacity benefits compared to an area where only 1 in 100 does.

The complex effects of experience

There is a further possibility, however – that the impacts of experience actually depend on media coverage of claimants,⁸³ in two ways.

Firstly, given that ‘deservingness’ is often invisible, we often do not have enough evidence to conclusively decide if a person is deserving (see Chapter 3). One way in which ‘deservingness’ may not be visible is when a disability is hidden, so to look at the extent of this we asked disabled claimants in our MORI survey how easy it was for people to spot their health problem/disability. Only one in five disabled claimants said that their disability was usually ‘obvious to anyone when they see me in the street’; nearly twice as many said that people usually ‘only know about my disability if I tell them’.

Table 14: The visibility of disability among disability/incapacity benefit claimants in Britain

	Prevalence (%)
On most days, my health condition/disability is obvious to anyone when they see me in the street	21
On most days, my health condition/disability is obvious to anyone when they first properly meet me	11
When people spend time around me they figure out that I have this health condition/disability	28
On most days, people only know about my health problem/disability if I tell them	39

Source: MORI survey May 2012, from 276 people giving an answer to this question; see text & Appendix 1 for details.

In other words, while not commented on directly by our participants, people who read negative newspaper coverage of benefits claimants may be more likely to see claimants as fraudulent when the picture in front of them is inconclusive rather than literally seeing fraud.⁸⁴

Secondly, though, having made judgments about individuals, people need to decide how to generalise: does this person typify all claimants, or are they instead ‘the exception that

⁸² There were also some weaker signs that (i) local JSA claims have a similar effect, and that (ii) other claims of means-tested benefits in the neighbourhood (primarily single parent and carer benefits) were associated with lower perceived unemployment or disability false claims. Further details on these results are provided in the Appendices.

⁸³ The general idea here has been convincingly shown by Dan Hopkins for immigration. At the start of the 2005 general election campaign there was no relationship between (a) local levels of immigration and (b) whether someone thought immigration was the most important issue facing the country. Yet just after the Conservatives’ election campaign had emphasised immigration issues, people in areas with more immigrants were noticeably more likely to flag immigration as a key issue. Hopkins explains this through his ‘theory of politicized places’ (p508): ‘At times when immigration issues are politically salient, established residents might indeed feel competition with neighbouring immigrants. They might connect their immigrant neighbours with their difficulties in finding a job. But when immigration is not a major issue, people might not draw political conclusions from the presence of immigrants next door.’

⁸⁴ A similar complexity can be seen in the debate about the ‘contact hypothesis’, which suggested that contact with stigmatised groups (typically black or disabled people) is critical to reducing prejudice. Several decades of empirical evidence have however shown that contact in some situations can increase prejudice (Crandall and Eshleman 2003; Eisenberg et al 2012).

proves the rule'? Because people generally accepted that both deserving and undeserving claimants existed, the act of generalisation was critical (whether people were sympathetic or hostile to benefit claimants overall):

Belinda: Last year I volunteered in a charity shop because I couldn't find a job.... And there was a lady I worked with there, who was on benefits, yet she was working in the charity shop and I think she felt that she couldn't find a job, she was struggling to find a job, but if she was working in a charity shop she was somehow giving something back and she was still doing something... they're still doing something good but (...) **that's not the majority of people.** (Non-claimant group).

Anne: Like that woman who kidnapped her own kid, they don't say right she's one in a million, and the man with nine children by 5 different wives, he's one in you know, five hundred thousand. **They never say that for every one of these, there are a million like my son who've just not been able to get a job** (Non-claimant group).

The media and individual experience seem to act as two facing mirrors, each influencing the way that participants viewed benefit claims. So for example, personal 'knowledge' of fraud gave credibility to media portrayals if they were challenged:

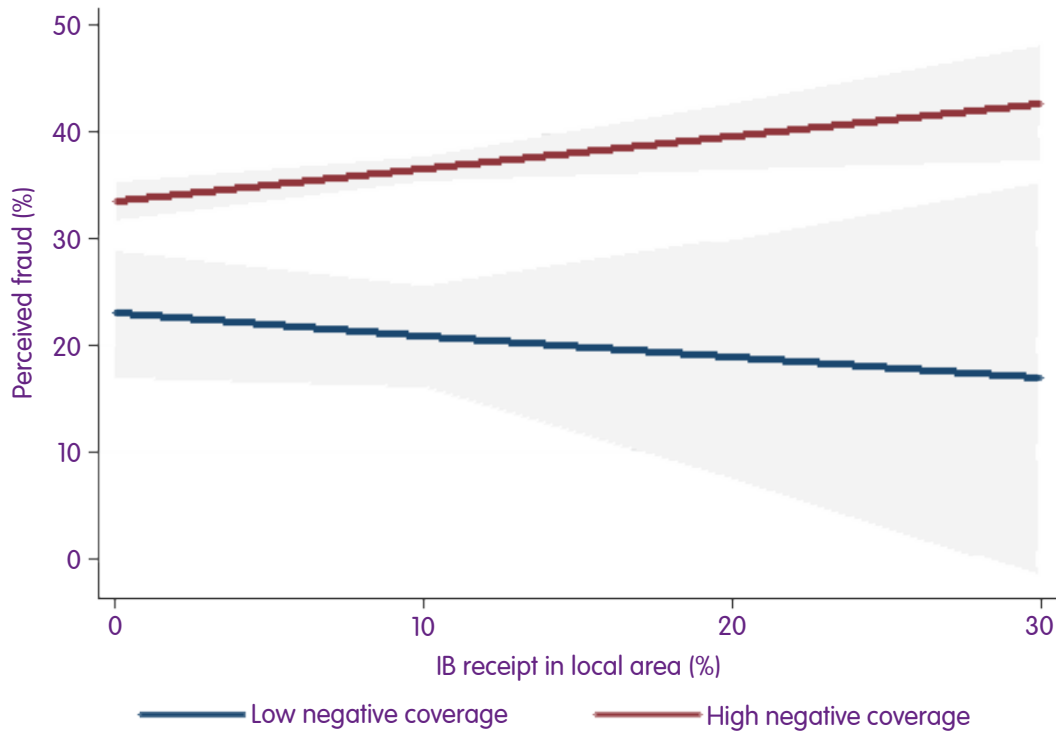
Donna: I don't think it's helped by the fact that you open the newspaper and you know there's people and you see look there's this family, and this, and they've got so many children, and look they're living in this...

Anne: Well there are, I know this one, **I actually know him personally** [Non-claimant group, emphasis added]

At the same time, the existence of widespread media accounts of fraudulent behaviour suggested that the claims they 'knew' were not isolated examples.

To see if this hypothesis holds in practice, we tested whether there was an interaction between newspaper portrayals of benefits and living in a neighbourhood with lots of claimants. This again uses the 2007 British Social Attitudes Survey, which we combined with data looking at the proportion of articles about benefits claimants that were negative in the newspaper that people read regularly ('stigmatising newspapers'); the results are shown in Figure 5.

Figure 9: How perceived fraud is affected by newspaper coverage and local benefit receipt



Source: British Social Attitudes 2007, merged with additional data on newspaper coverage and neighbourhood benefit claims. Grey areas indicate 95% confidence intervals; see text and appendices for details.

This shows exactly what we predicted (although the pattern does not always reach statistical significance).⁸⁵ People who read less stigmatising newspapers (in blue) perceive slightly less fraud as the number of people claiming benefits in their neighbourhood increases (although this decline is not significant). In contrast, people who read more stigmatising newspapers (in red) perceive significantly more fraud where claimant rates are higher. Exactly the same results were obtained in the MORI survey for both the question on fraud and for personal stigma, although because our neighbourhood measures are cruder, these effects were not quite statistically significant.⁸⁶

We should stress that it is hard to be sure whether this is due to newspaper coverage or political attitudes in general; a similar pattern can be seen when looking at the impact of local benefits claims among broadly left-wing vs. right-wing people (although not when comparing libertarian to authoritarian people). Still, there is some support for our general hypothesis, that the impact of personal experience depends on whether you are predisposed to see benefit claimants as deserving or not. In summary, being around benefits claimants makes people perceive greater levels of fraud – but ONLY if they are already unsympathetic to benefits claimants.

⁸⁵ The main effect of local incapacity benefit receipt (on perceived fraud) was statistically significant. Furthermore, when we looked at the interaction with newspaper coverage, the effect of local incapacity benefit receipt was positive and significant for people reading stigmatising newspapers, but negative and insignificant for those reading non-stigmatising newspapers (as shown above). However, the interaction term between stigmatising newspapers and local benefit receipt itself was non-significant. It is nevertheless correct to say 'the statistically significant effect of benefit receipt on perceived fraud was only seen among those reading stigmatising newspapers'.

⁸⁶ Rather than having data on people's neighbourhoods of 1,500 people, we were instead restricted to using postcode districts of an average of 20,000 people, meaning we had a much smaller number of different areas to compare. Nevertheless, it is reassuring that the pattern we obtain is almost exactly the same for perceived fraud in both surveys, and for felt stigma and perceived fraud in the MORI survey.

Summarising the effect of personal experience

We can now take stock of the evidence for possible links of experience to stigma that we outlined at the start of the section:

1. **'Seeing undeservingness':** People living in neighbourhoods with more benefit claimants perceive more fraud and report more personal stigma – but this is only true if they are inclined to view benefit claimants negatively (which itself may be prompted by the coverage of benefits claimants in the media). Given that the deservingness of benefit claimants is often hidden, there may be vicious circles of stigma: people who stigmatise benefits claimants may be more likely to judge people they meet as undeserving and to see these people as typical, which leads to greater stigma, and so on.
2. **'Self-esteem and resentment':** People in low social grades and particularly those with low education attach more stigma to claiming benefits. While some of this may be due to 'seeing undeservingness', it may also be a way for low-status people to enhance their own self-identity, and/or a displacement of people's financial worries and status anxieties onto a convenient target.
3. **'Empathy':** There is no support here that the information and empathy from knowing benefit claimants reduces stigma or perceived fraud. Other studies do find an effect,⁸⁷ but we have no direct measures of whether people know any benefit claimants well; when just looking at the effect of living nearby to claimants, any information/empathy effect is outweighed by other forces. We could speculate that close, empathetic relationships with claimants may have a different impact on stigma than more distant contacts – but we have no direct evidence for this.
4. **'Dependency culture':** Benefits claimants do report lower stigma than non-claimants – as we would expect, given that people who feel stigma strongly will try and avoid claiming benefits (see Chapter 6). People in social housing also believe that benefits claiming is slightly less stigmatised in wider society, even though they themselves hold the same level of self-stigma as others.

However, both claimants and non-claimants alike overwhelmingly reject the idea that people should be ashamed to claim benefits (and other research similarly shows that people claiming do not differ from the rest of the population in terms of their work ethic, e.g. Dean & Taylor-Gooby (1992). Neither is there evidence that stigma is lower in areas where benefit claims are more common (in fact, as the evidence on 'seeing undeservingness' suggests, the reverse seems to be true). There is therefore no support for the more far-reaching implications of the idea of a 'dependency culture'.

⁸⁷ Furaker et al 2003 finds people perceive greater deservingness among unemployed people if they have friends or family who are unemployed; while (Jeene et al In Press) finds that people are less in favour of means-testing disability benefits if they live with someone claiming disability benefits.

The relationship between the design of the benefit system and stigma

The previous section looked at the impact of personal experience on stigma. A further possibility is that the design of the benefit system itself has an impact on the level of stigma experienced. We consider two types of evidence here to examine this idea. Firstly, we look at national evidence on the stigma that attaches to different types of benefit, whether means-tested or universal. We then look at international comparisons.

The design of the benefit system

It has long been argued that universal and contributory benefits are less stigmatising than those that require a means test in order to access them (see Spicker 1984, Chapter 10). We found some evidence for this above. Tax credits were explicitly designed along the principles of 'progressive universalism' – 'support for all, and more help for those who need it most, when they need it most' (HM Treasury 2003 cited by Bennett 2004:47). And this was mirrored in our finding that people were more likely to say that they would delay/avoid claiming benefits than tax credits due both to (i) 'how you would feel about yourself for claiming (e.g. 'pride', dislike of 'charity')'; and (ii) 'thinking [benefits/tax credits] are for other people, not people like me'. Together with the increase in take-up over time in Figure 8 below, this suggests tax credits have been successful in reducing stigma.

Why should universal and contributory benefits be seen as less stigmatising than non-contributory benefits which require a means test? Firstly, benefits that are provided as a citizenship right or in return for some kind of contribution are less stigmatising, as suggested by our theoretical model in Chapters 1–3; Georg Simmel in 1908 wrote that '[t]he humiliation, shame and loss of status brought about by the acceptance of charity are alleviated... to the extent that [the benefit] is not granted out of compassion or a sense of duty or even expediency but rather because he has a valid claim to it' (cited by van Oorschot 2002:180).

Secondly, claimants of most means-tested benefits are consistently seen as less deserving than claimants of more universal benefits.⁸⁸ This may appear counter-intuitive; if one of the deservingness criteria is 'need', then surely means-tested claimants are more genuinely in need? The explanation, according to Christian Albrekt Larsen (2008, building on innumerable others), is that selectivity 'opens the discussion' on whether recipients are deserving, compared to universalism that 'closes' this debate. Selectivity by its nature draws attention to the threshold between the 'needy' and the rest, whether this 'needy' group are themselves to blame for their situation, and whether claimants are appropriately grateful for the money, all of which are de-emphasised for more universal benefits.⁸⁹

A parallel argument may link institutional stigma to the design of the benefits system, to the extent that the process of claiming benefits is about putting up with organised suspicion – particularly for disability benefit claimants:

Yasmin: Appalling. I was going to say to you, do they jump through all these hoops to prove, because the public feel, I don't think so, at all. I think it's, they make things difficult to put us off, and they insult us, and they abuse us basically (agreement). I mean, those kind of things are abusive, and I think they just do it to frighten people away, make it difficult (Disability Benefits group).

88 This fits Titmuss' famous aphorism (1968: 134): 'services for poor people have always tended to be poor quality services', in the process of arguing that the 'stigma of the means-test' was a deliberate part of the system: 'the primary purpose of the system and the method of discrimination was... deterrence... To this end, the most effective instrument was to induce among recipients... a sense of personal fault'.

89 Larsen supplements this account with two other institutional features that are not the focus here: welfare state generosity (with the idea that greater generosity makes claimants seem more similar to the rest of society), and the extent of job opportunities (where fewer opportunities make claimants seem less responsible for their situation).

International evidence

A similar finding comes from looking at international evidence about the design of different benefit systems. To begin with, universal and contributory benefits are less stigmatised than those requiring a means test cross-nationally. In the US, Medicaid is noticeably less stigmatised than 'welfare' benefits like TANF (Stuber and Schlesinger 2006). Even in less stigmatising countries like Sweden, Denmark and Norway, around two-thirds of people say that recipients of means-tested social assistance are 'looked down upon', which is two to three times the numbers saying this about non-means-tested contributory unemployment benefit recipients (Halvorsen 2002).⁹⁰ Likewise, institutional stigma is higher for social assistance in Sweden than for other benefits agencies (Kumlin 2002:Ch10).

Yet there is a further lesson to be gained from international evidence. Table 15 below shows that Britons report much less stigma to receiving money without working than other countries – only 39% agree this is humiliating, which is 28th out of the 31 OECD countries with data. However, Britain thinks that more benefit claimants are undeserving than most other countries (and as we have suggested throughout this report, attributing 'undeservingness' to claimants may be the main way in which benefits stigma operates in the UK). We can also see this in comparative European data.⁹¹

This does not mean that in countries like Sweden people pay no attention to deservingness (Bang Petersen 2012), nor that people believe that all claimants are deserving,⁹² but rather that such attitudes are much more common in Britain than in most comparable countries. In Table 15, 62% think that 'many' or 'almost all' benefit claimants are not really entitled to them – almost double the number saying this in Sweden (and nearly ten times as many as in the Netherlands), and putting Britain only behind countries such as Greece, Italy and Turkey.

90 Benefits to do with housing are seen slightly differently and are stigmatised only at the level of unemployment benefits in these countries (Larsen 2008 as cited by Horton and Gregory 2009:108).

91 Out of 29 countries, Britain is 8th highest in thinking that 'most unemployed people do not really try to find a job', 5th highest in thinking 'many people manage to obtain benefits and services to which they are not entitled', and 2nd highest in thinking 'employees often pretend they are sick to stay home'. Data from the European Social Survey 2008.

92 Separate data shows that around 40% of Swedes, Norwegians and Danes believe that many on social assistance are not really poor, and many of those reporting themselves ill are not really ill (Halvorsen 2002).

Table 15: Benefits stigma and perceived deservingness in OECD countries

OECD Country	Humiliating to get money without working		Claiming benefits when not entitled	
	Agree (%)	Rank in OECD	Almost all/many (%)	Rank in OECD
Australia	46	19		
Austria			59	6
Belgium	42	23	33	17
Canada	47	17		
Chile	58	6		
Czech Republic	47	16	44	12
Denmark	37	29	31	18
Estonia	53	13	40	13
Finland	43	22	38	14
France	44	21	38	15
Germany	40	27	49	10
Great Britain	39	28	62	5
Greece	54	10	66	3
Hungary	51	14		
Iceland	42	25	44	11
Ireland	48	15	52	9
Israel	60	5		
Italy	65	2	76	2
Japan	42	24		
Luxembourg	55	9		
Mexico	55	8		
Netherlands	27	31	7	20
New Zealand				
Norway	54	11		
Poland	62	3	63	4
Portugal	57	7	57	8
Republic of Korea	62	4		
Slovakia	54	11	59	7
Spain	46	19	20	19
Sweden	35	30	33	16
Switzerland	46	18		
Turkey	89	1	80	1
United States	40	26		

'Humiliating' = 'It is humiliating to receive money without having to work for it' (from 1 strongly agree to 5 strongly disagree). **'Benefit fraud'** = 'In your opinion, how many people in your country are doing the following? Claiming state benefits to which they are not entitled' (almost all/many/some/almost none). Source: World Values Survey 2000/2004.

This fits the same arguments about contribution and means-testing for individual benefits: the UK is a country that relies much more heavily on means-testing and much less heavily on contribution than most other European countries (Clasen 2001), and this seems to be associated with a greater level of stigma. The only direct evidence on this is provided by Albrekt Larsen (2006:106–109), who found that benefits that are claimed by more people tend to be less stigmatised – even when looking at the same types of benefits within the narrow confines of the Nordic countries. Moreover, stigma is not only likely to be because of greater means-testing in the UK, but may also reflect the low levels of benefits in the UK that create a lifestyle divide between claimants and others, as Albrekt Larsen argues based on a comparison of Denmark and Finland (2006:114–121).

One pathway through which these effects might happen is through the media. A recent comparative study by Albrekt Larsen and Dejgaard (2012) compares the newspaper representation of benefit claimants in the UK, Sweden and Denmark using a sample of coverage 2004–2009. They find that fraud is a much more prominent theme in the UK – indeed, it is almost non-existent in the other countries (Table 16) – with positive UK articles being largely restricted to pensioners. That said, this study focuses on social assistance claimants (which in all countries are means-tested and effectively non-contributory); the remaining differences may therefore be either a knock-on effect of the more widely means-tested non-contributory system in the UK; a result of the more universal, citizenship-based version of means-testing in Nordic countries (Albrekt Larsen 2006:101); the outcome of the higher level of benefits in Sweden and Denmark that make poor people’s lifestyles less different to others; or simply reflect other cultural factors.

**Table 16: Newspaper portrayal of poor people/
social assistance claimants across countries**

	UK	Sweden	Denmark
Stories with a ‘negative’ topic	43%	27%	26%
...of which: fraud	10%	1%	0%
...of which: other abuse	9%	0%	2%
Stories with a ‘positive’ topic	41%	62%	55%
(Total stories)	188	73	152

Taken from Albrekt Larsen and Dejgaard (2012)

In conclusion, high levels of perceived undeservingness and hostile media reporting in the UK may be a consequence (as well as a cause) of the predominantly means-tested and non-contributory system in the UK. And changes in the benefits system may partly explain the increase in stigma in Britain shown in Chapter 3, as the British welfare state has become less universal and contributions-based (Horton and Gregory 2009) – and promises to become even more so in future (Horton 2010; McKee and Stuckler 2011). In contrast, a decline in perceived deservingness is not repeated in the only countries where we know of similar trend data, where means-tested non-contributory benefits are less dominant.⁹³ It is more difficult to get evidence on structural factors like system design than individual-level factors like personal experience, but the evidence suggests that those who are concerned with stigma cannot avoid thinking about the institutional logic of the system itself.

⁹³ For example, in Sweden Svallfors (Svallfors) finds a rise in perceived deservingness (‘Many of those who report themselves ill are not really ill’ and ‘Many of those receiving social assistance are not really poor’) over the late 1980s and early 1990s. There is also ongoing work on the Netherlands, although this is only available in draft form (Jeene et al 2010).

Chapter 6: The impacts of benefits stigma

Summary

Participants in our focus groups believed that stigma would influence their decision whether or not to claim benefits, with some arguing that the design of the benefit system was intended to discourage claiming. However, decisions about whether to claim were also influenced by the complexity of the system and the incentives embedded within it, and, critically, by the level of perceived need of the claimant, although this itself is affected by the extent to which claiming benefits is stigmatised. The quantitative evidence suggests that stigma is playing a role in explaining non-take-up of benefits and tax credits, with around one in four respondents to the MORI survey giving at least one stigma-related reason for delaying or not claiming. Looking at trends over time, non-take-up of benefits has risen concurrently with stigma, although this evidence is suggestive only.

Focus group participants were clear that stigma had a negative impact on their own sense of self worth. Claimants of disability benefits described the process of demonstrating their 'incapacity' in order to make a claim as humiliating and discouraging. Jobseeker's Allowance claimants spoke of having to combat feelings of negativity that the distance between perceptions of them as 'scroungers' and their own difficulties in finding employment produced. However, there is mixed evidence from the literature as to whether benefits stigma results in worse mental health for claimants.

Impacts on the take-up of benefits

Benefits stigma is probably mentioned most often when discussing the level of take-up of means-tested benefits. It is well known that large numbers of people who are eligible for benefits fail to claim them – with as many as 77% of Britons agreeing with this statement in 2010.⁹⁴ While it is easy to think of take-up rates as referring to people who never claim benefits, in fact much take-up involves delays in claiming after a person becomes eligible.⁹⁵ The government have published estimates of the take-up of income-related benefits since 1990 (although they are [currently consulting](#) on abolishing this long-standing series), and the latest figures are shown in Table 6.

⁹⁴ British Social Attitudes data.

⁹⁵ As many of 80% of lone parent benefit recipients in the US had not applied as soon as they become eligible (Blank & Ruggles 1995, cited by Walker 2005:193), and the same is reportedly true for claiming disability benefits like DLA in the UK (Kasparova et al 2007:44).

Table 18: The take-up of benefits in Britain 2009–2010

	Take-up as a share of all cases (%)	Take-up as a share of total expenditure (%)
Income Support / Employment & Support Allowance	77–89	82–92
Jobseeker's Allowance	60–67	61–70
Housing Benefit	78–84	84–90
Council Tax Benefit	62–69	64–71
Pension Credit	62–68	73–80
Basic State Pension	≈97	≈97
Child Benefit	95–96	95–96
Tax Credits for families with children	86–94	89–96
Tax Credits for people without children	26–29	31–38

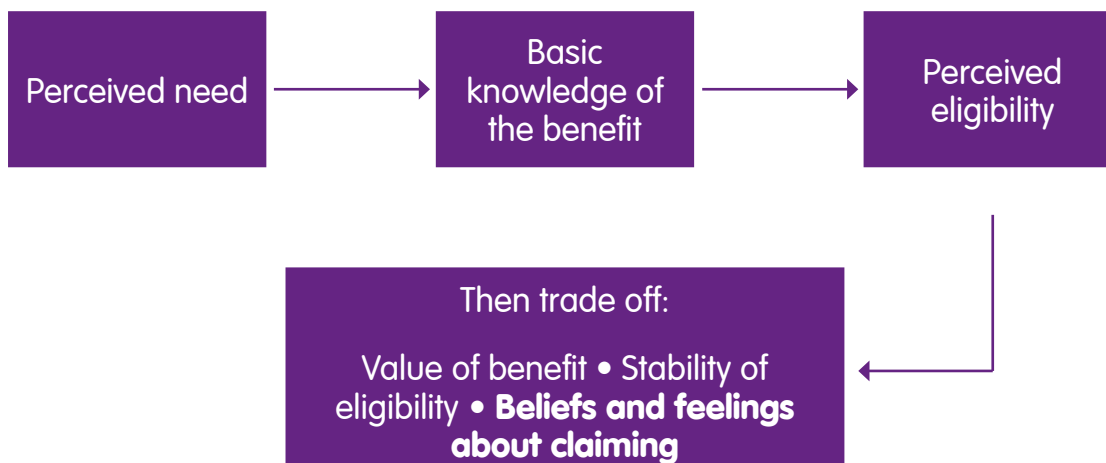
Notes: IS/ESA and JSA are only for income-based versions of the benefits, not contribution-based versions. Housing Benefit includes Local Housing Allowance. Ranges reflect sampling uncertainty, as these estimates are based on estimated eligibility from representative sample surveys, and (in some cases) further uncertainty due to the complexity of estimating take-up. 1 Tax credit data refers to the take-up of Child Tax Credits + Working Tax Credits among those eligible for both (for 'tax credits for families with children') and take-up of Working Tax Credits alone (for 'tax credits for people without children').

Sources: benefits data from DWP; Child Benefit/tax credit data from HMRC; state pension figures from answer to Parliamentary Question in Dec 2004; accessed 4/8/2012.

These show that take-up rates as a share of all cases are >95% for universal benefits (the basic pension, Child Benefit), around 80% for certain income-related benefits (Housing Benefit, Income Support/Employment & Support Allowance, Tax Credits for families with children), and around 65% for other income-related benefits (Pension Credit, Council Tax Benefit, Jobseeker's Allowance), with the very low take-up of Working Tax Credit as an exception (<30%). Take-up rates are higher as a share of the total value of benefits that people are entitled to; this simply reflects that people with small entitlements are less likely to claim. (In Chapter 7, we return to the link of stigma to the design of different benefits).

Reasons for non-take-up

So why are people not claiming money they are entitled to? We can think of the decision to claim benefits as following several stages: after they perceive they might be eligible for the benefit, people then trade off how much claiming the benefit will give them; whether their circumstances are stable enough to bother; and – critically – their beliefs and feelings about claiming benefit.⁹⁶



⁹⁶ This comes from Kerr 1982, as adapted by van Oorschot 1996 (Walker 2005:196) (see also Craig 1991).

It is this final consideration where we might expect stigma to matter – and we found evidence for this in our focus groups. Sometimes this was participants talking about personal stigma as a reason for not claiming (mentioned in Chapter 2), but particularly it was where they cited institutional stigma, with participants suggesting that the benefits system was deliberately designed in order to make the process of claiming more difficult.

Jim: There's loads of people who don't claim for various reasons, one of them being that I think coz they know what it's like, you're dealing with like a monolith of sort of bureaucracy, and you have to really have a strong sort of condition to er, have a fight in you sometimes. (JSA group).

The simplest way of assessing the extent to which stigma actually affects take-up is to ask people directly if this affects their decision on whether to claim. To do this, we included a series of questions in our commissioned MORI survey, asking separately about the decision to claim tax credits and benefits. We asked about people's past experiences (if they claimed in the past year) or how they think they would feel if they thought they were eligible (if they had not claimed).⁹⁷ People could select as many reasons as they felt applied from a series of options, as shown in the box below.

Reasons for delaying or not claiming benefits / tax credits

Felt stigma

- How you would feel about yourself for claiming (e.g. 'pride', dislike of 'charity')
- Thinking [benefits/tax credits] are for other people, not people like me

Social stigma

- How family, friends or neighbours would react

Claims stigma

- Having to provide personal information (about income or having a partner)
- How I would be treated by officials while applying

Non-stigma reasons

- Too hard to figure out if I'm entitled
- Too much hassle to apply for them
- Another reason – please specify _____

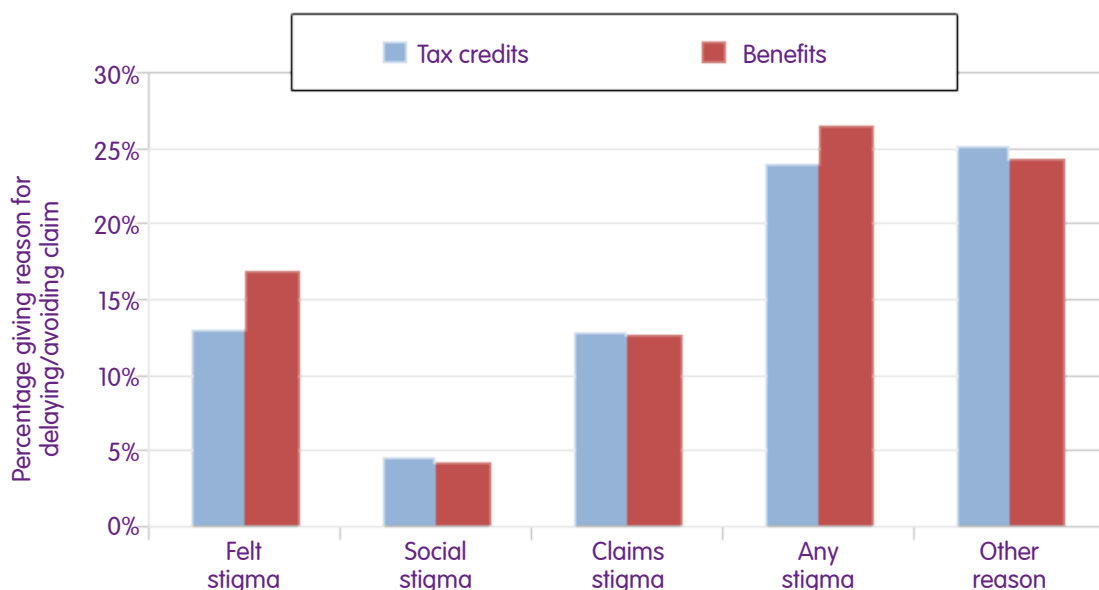
The results are shown in Figure 6. We can see that around one in four respondents gave at least one stigma-related reason for delaying or not claiming benefits/tax credits – similar to the proportions in another survey⁹⁸ – with personal stigma and claims stigma being reported more often than social stigma. (We come back to the differences in these results between benefits and tax credits in Chapter 7). Stigma-related reasons are given as often as practical reasons, and in total over 4 in 10 respondents gave at least one reason why they would delay or not claim benefits and tax credits. Such self-reports are backed up by other studies

⁹⁷ Past-year claimants were asked, 'Which of the following, if any, have made YOU YOURSELF delay or not claim [benefits/tax credits] in the past, from the point you needed and thought you might be entitled to them?' Non-claimants were asked 'Which of the following, if any, would make YOU YOURSELF less likely to claim [benefits/tax credits], if you thought you needed and might be entitled to them?' Unless otherwise specified, claimants and non-claimants have been pooled together for the analyses below.

⁹⁸ A recent YouGov poll for Elizabeth Finn Care found 15.4% saying they 'would rather cut back on essentials, like food, than claim Welfare Benefits', but only 3.5% went as far as the more extreme response of saying 'I would never claim Welfare Benefits, even if needed, as I couldn't live with the shame'. Overall, 66.5% said that if needed they would claim benefits – similar to the proportion in our MORI survey saying 'as soon as I thought I needed them and was eligible, I would apply'.

that show reported stigma predicts take-up per se, and that systems that reduce social stigma improve take-up.⁹⁹

Figure 10: Reasons for delaying/avoiding claiming benefits or tax credits



Source: commissioned MORI survey May 2012.

Non-stigma reasons for non-take-up

As our model makes clear though, non-take-up is about more than stigma. Figure 6 shows that non-stigma-related reasons for delaying/avoiding claiming ('Too hard to figure out if I'm entitled' and 'Too much hassle to apply for them') are given as often as stigma-related reasons for delaying/avoiding claims. Moreover, our questions looked at attitudes towards claiming among the general population, *once they 'thought [they] needed and might be entitled' to benefits* – but our model above suggests that these earlier stages may be important.

In our focus groups, participants cited the design of the system as an influence on the decision to claim, both its complexity (perceived as deterring claims), and the incentives it provided to engage claim benefits rather than engage in paid work (perceived as encouraging claims). The critical factor however in decisions over whether to claim benefits was, unsurprisingly, the first stage of the model: need. Claimants of disability benefits often felt they had no other option than to claim benefits. Participants in the non-claimant group discussed the potential personal circumstances of the vignettes that we presented as part of the focus group discussion – whether they had mortgage costs, the level of their partner's income – in detail when deciding whether they would make a decision to claim in those circumstances. And as those in the mixed group put it, the principal reason not to claim would be if you already had enough money to live off.

One way of investigating the balance of these factors is to investigate reasons for non-take-up among those who have been established not to claim even though they are eligible. Van Oorschot (1995:195-196) found that 50–60% of non-take-up in most of the Dutch schemes he analysed was because people were simply not aware of the benefit, together with another 10–20% believing strongly that they were ineligible – leaving only 20–30% of non-take-up that could be attributable to stigma. This proportion is similar to many small surveys of eligible non-claimants in the UK and elsewhere.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ Only one study looks directly at the impact of self-reported stigma on take-up, and finds that stigma (controlling for knowledge of benefit rules, perceived eligibility and enrolment barriers) influences take-up of both Medicaid and the single parents' benefit TANF (Stuber and Kronebusch 2004). Evidence on the impact of particular policies that reduce stigma is given in the concluding chapter.

¹⁰⁰ For example, 23% of 95 extremely poor families in the US said they stayed away from welfare because of 'pride' (Zedlewski et al 2003), while a 1966 Ministry of Pensions study found around 25% of National Assistance non-claimants said they did not claim because of pride or dislike of charity (in Page).

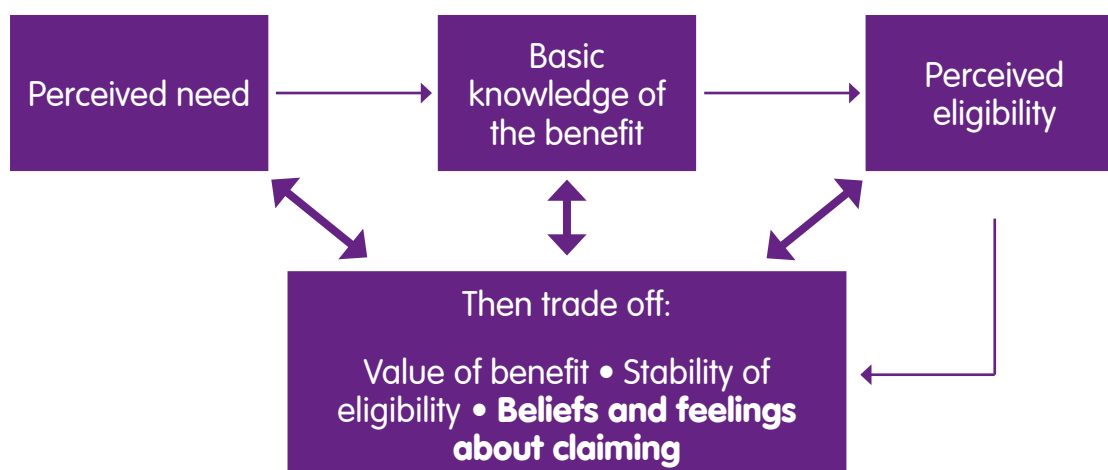
However, these surveys may underestimate stigma's true role. People may shy away from reporting stigma as a reason for non-take-up; as Taylor-Gooby (1976:37) notes, 'the admission of stigma is itself stigmatising'.¹⁰¹ Moreover, as Ruth Lister has put it, 'it might be the factor of stigma which prevents potential claimants from absorbing the information which is presented to them about means-tested benefits. Certainly, people seem to be far less ignorant about those benefits which do not involve a means-test, even though they tend to be less publicised' (cited in Golding and Middleton 1982:161).

Even the perception of need may itself be affected by levels of stigma. Those who see benefit claims as shameful may perceive the level of need that 'justifies' such claims as higher. One participant in the non-claimant focus group reported that they themselves had chosen not to claim benefits in the past, as they had felt that they could manage without them. The same participant also criticised the 'luxuries' that she felt many on benefits were able to afford:

Anne: I mean I believe poverty is not having a roof over your head, not having enough money to pay for proper heating, proper clothing and proper food. I do not believe it includes having a computer, or Sky television, or any of those other things. I think expectations of people these days is that you should have all of that, and people on benefits somehow manage to afford it, and when they do afford it, then I personally think that they're getting too much (Non-claimant group).

There are two other good pieces of evidence that suggest stigma plays a role in superficially 'non-stigma' reasons. Firstly, in our MORI survey, people who said that claimants are not treated with respect (or who perceived higher levels of benefits fraud) were more likely to say it was 'too much hassle to apply' or it was 'too hard to figure out if I'm entitled' – and it therefore is difficult to claim that such explanations are entirely unrelated to stigma. Secondly, even when people are given information about benefits and their eligibility for them, non-take-up remains. One of the most striking and widely cited examples of this is now quite old,¹⁰² and other examples find less non-take-up in the face of information,¹⁰³ but both find at least some cases where non-take-up seems unambiguously to be about stigma.

We might therefore see the diagram of the decision on whether to claim benefits as more of a circle, with beliefs and feelings about claiming affecting the earlier stages of the process:



¹⁰¹ Suggestive evidence for this is that much higher numbers say that some people do not claim due to stigma, compared to those who say that they themselves are affected (Reddin 1977 and Wyers 1975 cited by Spicker 1984). Another interpretation however (and that adopted by Spicker) is that people's responses for themselves are based on actual experience, whereas people's responses about others are guesses based on stereotypes on the nature of stigma.

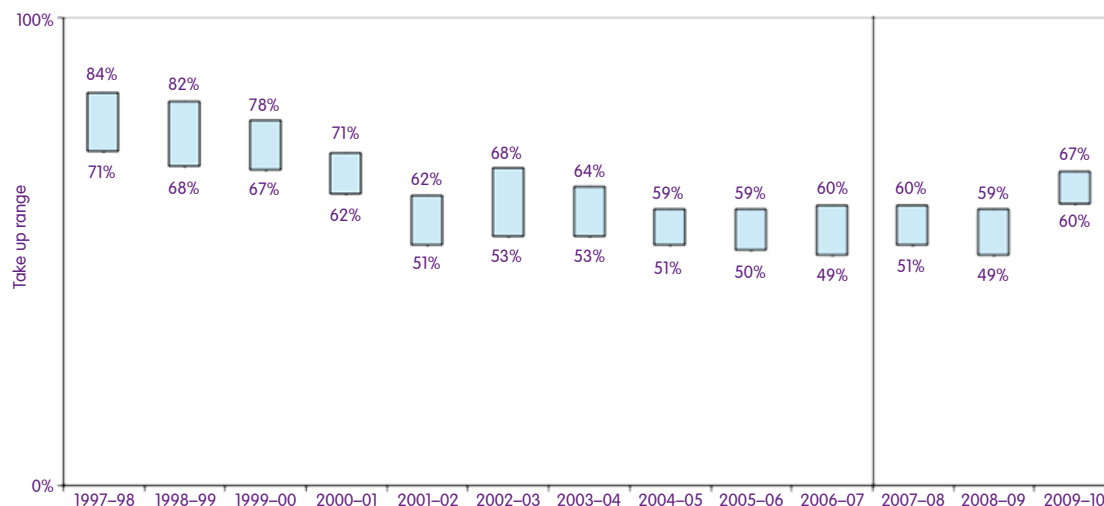
¹⁰² The best example is from a study of rent-related benefits in Batley, Yorkshire (Taylor-Gooby 1976). Concerted attempts to improve information through surveys and canvassing led to some – if modest – increases in take-up. But while remaining non-claimants in interviews appeared not to claim due to 'ignorance or misconception', only a minority went on to claim after the interviewer's detailed explanations about the means test and the offer to help with the claim forms. As Taylor-Gooby notes (p44), 'the lack of success is striking', and suggests a role for stigma.

¹⁰³ Daponte et al (1999) find a slightly greater impact of their intervention to raise take-up in the US, with 11 of 31 eligible households telling them they applied in the eight weeks following their interview, and a number of the remaining households either being eligible for only small amounts, or saying they would apply soon. They argue, 'Only one individual gave a response that could be interpreted as stigma' (p624).

Trends in stigma and trends in take-up

Finally, it is worth seeing if the rise in benefits stigma in recent decades (Chapter 3) is reflected in a decline in take-up over the same period. We must bear in mind here that establishing the take-up rate for any given benefit is challenging (the benefits system is complex, and checking if people actually would be eligible for a benefit they have never applied for is difficult), making comparisons over time uncertain. That said, the official estimates of trends in take-up rates over time are shown in Figure 11 and Figure 12.

Figure 11: Trends in the caseload take-up of Jobseeker's Allowance

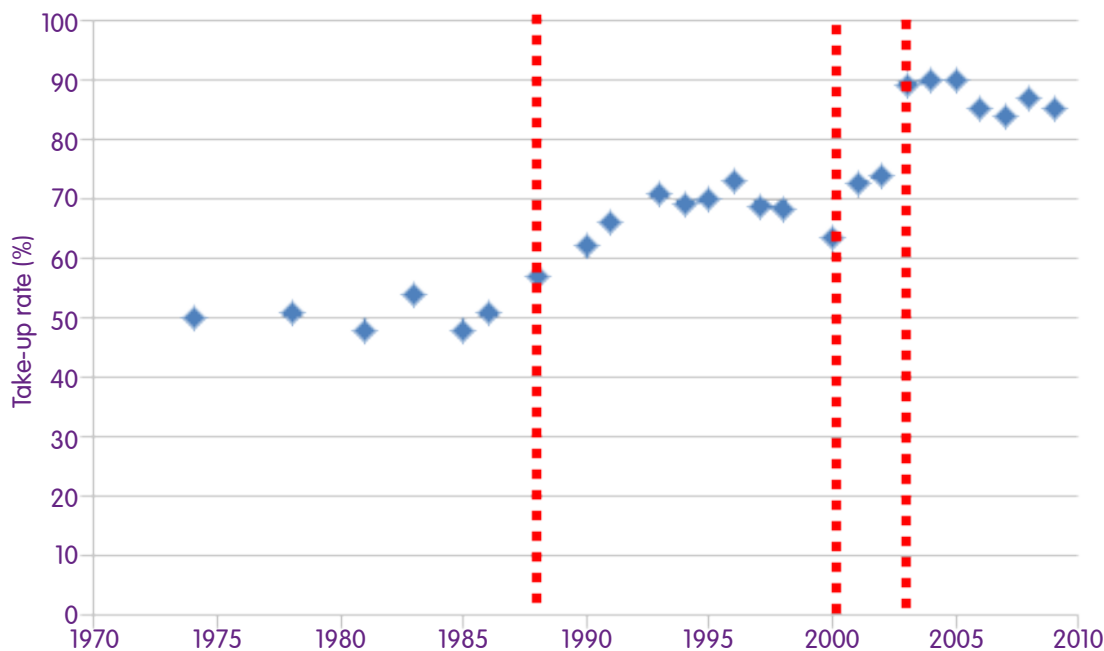


Source: DWP 2012, Table 6.5.1. Confidence ranges refer to biases as well as confidence intervals.

Looking first at benefits in Figure 11, we can see for Jobseeker's Allowance that there has been a noticeable fall in estimated take-up rates, from 71–84% in 1997/98 to 49–59% in 2008/09, before a slight recovery in 2009/10. Estimating the exact size of this decline is difficult due to methodological changes; DWP note that take-up 'has fallen by at least 3 percentage points although we cannot be certain due to high levels of bias', but our best – but uncertain – estimate is that this fall was much greater.

From the same DWP series of statistics, we can see that estimated take-up fell across a wide range of benefits – by at least 3 percentage points for income support/incapacity benefits, at least 4% for housing benefit, and at least 2% for Council Tax Benefit. At the same time, take-up has increased elsewhere – for pensioners' means-tested benefits (by around 15 percentage points, particularly over the course of the 1990s), and for tax credits (see Figure 12).

Figure 12: Trends in the caseload take-up of tax credits for low-income working families with children



Source: HMRC 2011, Part B Table 2. The original table notes, 'Figures should be used as a broad guide only due to methodological, data and policy changes over the various years'; red lines indicate major changes between different benefits for this group. Central estimates 1996–2002 were obtained as the mid-point of the lower and upper bounds.

There is therefore suggestive evidence (in this section) that take-up of working-age means-tested benefits has fallen at the same time as stigma has risen (as discussed in chapter 3), although this may also reflect the declining value of out-of-work benefits during this time. However, pensioners' benefits and tax credits have seen rises in take-up (both benefits which saw significant take-up campaigns to promote them during this period). This is also subject to a high degree of uncertainty, partly because it is difficult to get robust trends in take-up over time, and partly because there are a number of determinants of non-take-up of which stigma is only one. Nevertheless, we can at least go as far as saying that the evidence is consistent with both (i) a rise in benefits stigma for working-age people, and (ii) a role for stigma in non-take-up.

Summing up, it is clear that stigma partly explains why some people who are eligible for benefits do not claim them. But while stigma is an important factor in non-take-up, it is not the only reason why people fail to claim benefits (Spicker 1984:65; Currie 2004:27).

The positive impacts of stigma?

Implicit in many stigma studies is the idea that stigma is something to be avoided – but in fact there are those who want to 'bring back stigma' to social policy (Green 1996:23, while working for the right-wing think-tank, the Institute of Economic Affairs). The American commentator Charles Murray wrote a blog in 2009 with the title *Stigma Makes Generosity Feasible*,¹⁰⁴ arguing that stigma has three functions: (i) it gets people to take actions to avoid claiming benefits in advance, (ii) it makes them less likely to claim benefits unless they really need them, and (iii) it encourages people to leave benefits as quickly as possible. Similar assumptions appear in economists' models (Besley and Coate 1992:172) and indeed in several centuries of debate over benefits, such as in the (in)famous Poor Law Commission of 1834. As we saw earlier, some claimants believe the system to have been designed with this in mind.

But is there any evidence for these claims? We have already seen that stigma makes some people less likely to claim benefits, but that is not the same as saying that stigma helps

¹⁰⁴ <http://blog.american.com/2009/11/stigma-makes-generosity-feasible/>, The American (blog of the American Enterprise Institute), Nov 30 2009.

target benefits on those most in need, for which there is little evidence. People who are entitled to greater levels of means-tested benefits are more likely to claim them but this may simply be because people who are only eligible for small sums are less certain about their eligibility or are put off by the bureaucratic process of applying (Walker 2005:195). The only direct test of stigma as an aid to efficient targeting is in Stuber & Kronebusch (2004), and they find that stigma was no less a deterrent to those with lower levels of need than anyone else (see also the mixed evidence in Currie 2004:15-18).

Counter-intuitive though it may seem, the very reverse of the Murray view has also been argued: that stigma **increases** 'dependency'. This is because one reaction to stigma – either deliberate or unconscious – is to adopt the very characteristics that are associated with the stigmatised group (Besley and Coate 1992:182). For example, when primed to think about older people, people leave the room more slowly and have a poorer memory of it, in line with their stereotypes (Dijksterhuis and Bargh (2001), cited by Dolan et al 2010:25).¹⁰⁵ Stigmatisation more broadly can also reduce people's life chances via outright discrimination and others' expectations (Link and Phelan 2001:371). Despite some speculation, however, there is no direct evidence about whether these counterproductive effects apply to benefits stigma.

Similarly contradictory arguments can be seen as to whether stigma encourages or discourages benefits fraud. The government in 1998 claimed that **'the most effective deterrent for those who would commit fraud will always be peer group disapproval and pressure'** (cited by Grover 2005), an approach that has underpinned more than a decade's anti-fraud campaigns. However, one study found fraudulent benefit claimants said they were more comfortable with fraud because they thought lots of other people were doing it (Dean and Melrose 1996:12-13), and several have suggested that fraud is more likely when people perceive the benefits system as 'unfair' (Dean and Taylor-Gooby ; Mitton 2009).

Perhaps reflecting this, participants within the focus group with JSA claimants suggested that the impact of stigma might be to encourage participants to adopt less co-operative attitudes towards the system, as a means of 'hardening' themselves against its effects.

Researcher: It's interesting what you just said about, erm, becoming hardened. I don't know is that an experience that other people share, that idea of having to almost having to harden yourself after a while.

Graham: You get stuck... [inaudible] rather than getting into the jobcentre I sat outside the jobcentre right on a Wednesday while I sign on and watch the lads 'oh I've applied for them' knowing fair well that they haven't got the manpower to check to see if you've actually applied for owt and you're not going to get grief off the jobcentre for writing it down, you know what I mean. So it, it gets to a point where you just do things to make life easier. Yes you might have only found three things that are suitable that week but if you didn't get 20 on your job sheet for them to sign off you've just got to....you canna get caught because of the fact that they haven't got the resources to do anything about it (JSA group)

As for the other claims in this section, however, the evidence is not convincing here in either direction. It is therefore plausible that stigma helps target benefits on those who are in need. It is also plausible that stigma deters those in need from claiming, and that stigma fosters fraud and dependency. The evidence is simply not strong enough for us to entirely reject or confirm any of these hypotheses.

¹⁰⁵ Likewise, even when incentivised, Chinese students performed 10% worse if they were reminded of their inferior social status (Afriadi et al 2012).

Stigma, self worth and mental health

Benefits stigma by its nature involves shame or embarrassment; in Spicker's words, 'a stigma marks the recipient of welfare, damages his reputation, and undermines his dignity.' According to the economist Amartya Sen, the ability to avoid shame is one of the basic capabilities to which everyone should be entitled (in Reyles 2007). Robert Pinker (1971, cited by Page 1984:147) has taken this to the extreme of arguing that 'The imposition of stigma is the commonest form of violence used in democratic societies ... It can best be compared to those forms of psychological torture in which the victim is broken psychically and physically but left to all outward appearances unmarked.'

In the MORI survey here, stigma was reported by a non-negligible proportion of benefit claimants – that is, some people claiming benefits said that claiming their benefit was something to be ashamed of, or that other people thought that claimants of their benefit should be ashamed. The levels of this are shown in Table 18. So for example, the figure for high personal stigma under 'incapacity benefits' indicates that 9.3% of incapacity benefit claimants strongly agreed that people should feel ashamed **specifically for claiming incapacity benefits**. As we would expect from the results for British people as a whole (in Chapter 2), a substantial minority of claimants report some level of personal stigma, and just under half of claimants report some level of social stigma – **more** than half in the case of claimants of income support for single parents. So it is clear that a substantial minority of benefit claimants feel stigma for claiming, whether due to their own views or those of others.

Table 18: Stigma reported by claimants of each particular benefit

	In-work Tax Credits	Job- seeker's Allowance	Incapacity Benefits	Income Support for Single Parents	Housing Benefit
Personal Stigma - none	85.3%	80.0%	78.0%	71.3%	76.4%
Personal Stigma - low	9.6%	13.0%	12.7%	23.0%	17.4%
Personal Stigma - high	5.0%	7.0%	9.3%	5.7%	6.3%
Social Stigma - none	52.9%	53.5%	54.3%	46.5%	56.6%
Social Stigma - low	28.6%	32.0%	32.1%	41.0%	31.8%
Social Stigma - high	12.3%	14.4%	13.6%	12.6%	11.6%
Sample size per benefit	290	233	273	132	454

Source: commissioned MORI survey May 2012.

There are many deeper accounts of the feeling of stigma by individuals in newspapers and on blogs, and likewise in our focus groups we heard how stigma and poor treatment could lead to feelings of low self worth, lower self-efficacy, and as discussed, a sense that the system was against them.

For claimants of disability benefits, a key transmission mechanism for feelings of 'humiliation' was the process of having to demonstrate or describe their disability in order to receive benefits or support, whether through a claim form or at a personal assessment. Participants described processes that forced them to concentrate on the negative aspects of their disability, and that often involved them demonstrating or explaining their condition to a degree that they felt was unnecessary. There was also a perception that professionals preferred disabled claimants to emphasise their own disability in order to make the process of claiming simpler. This could undermine disabled people's own attempts to 'focus on the positive'.

Will: When I was saying about being quite happy with yourself, don't see yourself as disabled and then having to just look at yourself really differently it makes you sort of question everything and doubt everything, I think it's really, I think that is negative, it's so unproductive, it's just, I think it's to all intents and purposes quite wrong, actually I think psychologically it's—

Yasmin: Harmful?

Will: Yeah. (Disability Benefits group).

Jobseeker's Allowance claimants appeared to be more affected by public attitudes in general, and the tension of having to contrast their own experience of being unable to find a job with the public perception that they were 'scrounging'. The following exchange illustrates the ways in which attitudes and stigma could impact on claimants' self-perceptions, and their views of others, including of professional staff.

Jim: I find I have to really, like, I'm quite a positive person, not some, not to the happy clappy extent, but erm, positive enough. But even I sometimes find I have to expend a lot of mental energy kind of not taking on board all the negativity of it.

Bill: That's it.

Jim: And coz I, I could easily feel like it's me against the whole of society in a way. You know like, you can feel very lonely like that and you feel like you're up against this system which isn't necessarily set against you actively, it just doesn't really care enough or doesn't understand maybe is more of a problem.

Bill: If you have more negative vibes in you, you'll probably get dragged down even further.

Jim: Yeah that's it. And I'm determined not to be and I know I'm not like worthless or anything like that, and I know I'm not a scrounging bit of scum but when it's told you over and over again and that's all you hear I can understand some people get really affected by it. Thankfully I'm kind of pig headed enough to be convinced I'm right even if I have 100 people telling me I'm not, but, I didn't always used to be like that and it's because I got a bit hardened. (JSA group).

Do these negative feelings translate into poor mental health in a wider sense? Psychologists make clear that both outright discrimination and threat mechanisms have clear health implications (Major and O'Brien 2005:409), but claimants may adopt coping strategies to avoid this:¹⁰⁶

- To avoid personal stigma, people often categorised themselves as a deserving claimant, contrasting themselves against the stigma of undeservingness (as we discussed in Chapter 3 and discuss further in Chapter 7). We can suggest the strong distinction drawn between 'deserving' and 'undeserving' within our focus groups, and the ascription of these negative images to claimants of 'other benefits' is to some extent evidence of this sort of coping strategy in operation – although this strategy was not necessarily a conscious one.
- It is also possible for claimants to use conscious strategies to avoid stigma. Claimants of both disability benefits and Jobseeker's Allowance within our focus groups believed that an individual's own attitudes would impact on both (i) how they were perceived, and (ii) how they dealt with any stigma they experienced. 'Staying positive' was seen as a task for the individual to attempt in the face of public and sometimes professional negativity.
- To avoid social stigma, people can avoid telling those outside of their close circle that they claim. As we noted above, nearly 1 in 10 people report that '*I would not tell my friends or family that I was claiming Welfare Benefits as it would be too shameful*'.¹⁰⁷
- Those who feel the strongest stigma may not claim benefits at all (see above).

¹⁰⁶ This fits the wider literature on other forms of stigma, where coping strategies include blaming others, collective action to challenge stigma, or disidentifying with the stigmatised group (Major and O'Brien 2005). Hence the impact of stigma on self-esteem has been found to be inconsistent (Crocker et al 1998). For example, on racial stigma – which is the most widely studied – blacks show no worse self-esteem than whites on either self-reported or implicit self-esteem measures (Major and O'Brien 2005:407)

¹⁰⁷ Elizabeth Finn Care YouGov poll 2012.

- Claims stigma is more difficult to avoid – but it is episodic, and restricted only to those occasions that people are required to interact with the benefits system, so its impact on feelings outside of these occasions is unclear.

Given these ways of coping, it is important to look at the empirical evidence on benefits claims and mental health. Obviously we would hope that the income from claiming benefits helps claimants' mental health, so these studies generally compare claimants to non-working people with the same level of income. Using these techniques, there is some evidence that benefits stigma **does** lead to worse mental health. A variety of studies show worse mental health in claimants vs. non-claimants (Nichols-Casebolt 1986; Ensminger 1995; Ensminger and Juon 2001), particularly among claimants of means-tested benefits (Rodriguez 2001; Rodriguez et al 2001).

However, other studies show more mixed results (Nichols-Casebolt 1986; Petterson and Friel 2001; Lee and Oguzoglu 2007). And even if there was a consistent relationship between benefit claimants and mental health, it would be unclear if this was because of benefits stigma, or whether poor mental health led to benefit claims, or whether the factors that influence whether people claim benefits also influence mental health.¹⁰⁸ This is not to say there is no genuine link – but rather that there is too little evidence to confirm a causal link with any degree of confidence.

Stigma and disability hate crime

Finally, because of its current public profile we should mention the link of stigma to disability hate crime. Hate crime is any criminal offence which someone – not necessarily the victim – believes is motivated by someone's disability.¹⁰⁹ This includes a number of individual cases, of which the most widely cited is that of Peter Greener, a man with multiple sclerosis who was reported as enduring 'eggs thrown at his house, stones thrown at his windows or paint thrown at his fence; more often, it was words hurled in his face: spastic, cripple, scum, scrounger. These assaults went on for months, leaving the former Nissan car-sprayer in floods of tears, feeling suicidal and on antidepressants.'¹¹⁰

Following this, various organisations have drawn attention to the link between stigma (often linked to the media and politicians; see Chapter 6) and hate crime. For example, the National Union of Journalists' Disabled Members Council issued a release in November 2011 saying 'Over the last few months we have seen a continuous drip-feed of stories which have promoted a range of inaccurate and generalised accusations against disabled people with long term health conditions. As a result disabled people have faced greater hostility from the public, with many claiming that they have experienced hostility, discrimination and even physical attacks from strangers.'¹¹¹ We also heard this occasionally echoed in our focus groups.

Sarah: 'Specially this current government, that's saying anybody who's on benefits, no matter whether they're using or abusing the system, are scroungers. And that is what the general public are picking up on. And that is what's fuelling the hate, whether it's an incident or a crime that is being done against those of us who are legitimately allowed to claim benefits. And we're the ones who are carrying the backlash.' (Disability benefits group).

But while the link of stigma to hostility is clear, it is harder to provide firm evidence for a direct link between stigma and hate crime. In June 2012, the *Independent* ran a headline that 'Hate crimes against disabled people soar to a record level', with the tagline "Anti-scrounger" rhetoric blamed for doubling of offences since 2008 financial crisis'.¹¹² However, when we look more closely at the figures they become more uncertain. The trend on disability hate crime only began in 2008, and even for this short-run trend, reported crime statistics are

¹⁰⁸ Studies vary in whether self-esteem/distress lead to benefits claims (Ensminger 1995; Kunz and Kalil 1999; Kozimor-King 2008), but as Rodriguez (2001) mentions, beyond this 'there is evidence that people who need means-tested benefits bear a heavier weight of disadvantage than those who do not need them.'

¹⁰⁹ In the absence of a formal legal definition, this is the Crown Prosecution Service's working definition; http://www.cps.gov.uk/publications/prosecution/disability_hate_crime_leaflet.pdf

¹¹⁰ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/dec/04/ian-birrell-prejudice-against-disabled>

¹¹¹ <http://www.disabilityalliance.org/nuj.htm>

¹¹² <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/hate-crimes-against-disabled-people-soar-to-a-record-level-7858841.html>

notoriously sensitive to changes in both public reporting and police behaviour. Given that both of these are likely to have led to a greater number of recorded disability hate crime offences, it is unclear if disability hate crimes have genuinely risen, and if so, what the scale of this is.

Even if stigma is not a cause of disability hate crime – and it may well be a cause – stigma by definition involves a feeling of shame and/or hostile attitudes from others, and these are sufficient reasons to be concerned about benefits stigma. In the following two chapters, we follow up the claims that the media and politicians have played a pivotal role in increasing stigma.

7. Conclusions and recommendations

Conclusions

This report set out to investigate the level of benefits stigma in the UK, its drivers, and the impacts of that stigma. In this concluding chapter, we briefly summarise our main findings, before turning to recommendations on how we can minimise the stigma of claiming benefits.

To what extent is claiming benefits stigmatised in Britain?

Our survey found that personal stigma was restricted to a minority, social stigma is quite common, and that institutional stigma is widespread. We found that personal stigma – a person's own view that claiming benefits is shameful – is restricted to a minority. We then looked at social stigma, our perception that other people think claiming benefits is shameful. Focus group participants were more likely to say other people felt this, but the survey showed that social stigma was quite common; about half of respondents suggested they perceive at least some social stigma. Finally, we looked at institutional stigma from the process of claiming benefits. This was commonly reported by our focus group participants and survey respondents alike.

What are the drivers of benefit stigma?

We suggest that benefit stigma in Britain is primarily driven by the perception that claimants are 'undeserving'. We suggest that stigma attaches to benefits when claimants are seen as undeserving recipients of unreciprocated gifts, or charity. A significant theme in our focus groups was the distinction between deserving and undeserving claimants.

Key criteria for achieving a 'deserving' status were need, and the level of responsibility that claimants were seen to hold for their own situation. Assessing this responsibility took different forms for different claimant types. For unemployed and working tax credit claimants, the key test was seen to be that they were 'making an effort' to address their situation, either by looking for work, or by attempting to increase their hours. For disabled claimants, responsibility attached to efforts, where possible, to improve their health situation. And for single parents, the idea of responsibility was around how they had ended up as a single parent – a question that seemed to turn principally on their sexual behaviour.

To look at the extent to which claimants were seen as deserving, we examined public estimates of the proportion of claimants seen as 'claiming falsely' or 'committing fraud'. We found that the public vastly overestimate these numbers. However, it is important to stress that few people think a majority of claimants are false (only 16–20%) or fraudulent (only 14%), with most people instead believing that fraud/false claims are restricted to a sizeable minority. Data also suggests that people now see claimants as less deserving than they did 20 years ago, with some changes happening in the late 1990s and others in the early 2000s. Over time the views of the British public on the deservingness of claimants seem to have shifted: people are more likely to say that claimants don't deserve help and that people in need are lazy.

The media is often blamed for levels of stigma in Britain, and we therefore wanted to look closely at media coverage. Our analysis of national newspapers from 1995 to 2011 found that while newspapers contain both positive and negative representations of claimants, the content of press stories is indeed skewed towards negative representations. (Positive and negative language is more balanced than the actual content of newspaper stories, as many articles about undeserving claimants will briefly refer to deserving claimants as a contrast). The content of articles is considerably more likely to refer to characteristics associated with 'undeservingness' such as dishonesty or failing to demonstrate reciprocity than they are to refer to 'deservingness' in the form of need or disability. While there is a lot of variation between titles, only two titles did not show a skew towards negative coverage.

The amount of coverage referencing fraud is very high in all titles (ranging from 21% to 39%) given the actual incidence of benefit fraud (around 2 per cent for all out-of-work benefits, see table 5). Although tabloids publish a lot of stories about individual cases of benefit fraud based on prosecutions, the main source for stories about fraud is the policy process

– statements from government and opposition parties, parliamentary committees and organisations. It is arguable therefore that welfare policy and politics are more important than editorial policy in driving high coverage of fraud overall, although this is not necessarily the case for all titles.

It is sometimes stated that coverage has become ‘more negative’ over recent years. Over the longer term we find that negative coverage in 2010/11 was at about the same level as in the late 1990s, an earlier period of intense media coverage of benefits. While it is true that the number of stories with negative content has grown, this is because all coverage of benefits has grown rather than because coverage has shifted towards negativity. However both the language and content of ‘negative’ coverage have changed substantially over time. While fraud remains very important in negative coverage, articles are much more likely now to refer to lack of reciprocity and effort on the part of claimants than they were previously. This shift in language seems to date from around 2008. So while coverage has not generally become ‘more negative’, the rise in a ‘scrounger’ discourse about claimants which many have referred to is a genuine phenomenon. The content of news coverage shows a similar shift, with more of a focus on claims which are held to be illegitimate for reasons other than fraud.

We were particularly interested in how media coverage influences stigma, and we found evidence – including from an experimental prime in our Ipsos MORI survey – to support the idea that negative media coverage and stigma are linked. Firstly, we found that people who read more stigmatising newspapers perceived higher levels of fraud and reported more personal stigma. Secondly, taking into account other factors that are associated with newspaper readership, we still found a link between newspaper coverage and perceived deservingness. Finally, when we randomly primed some people in our survey to think about fraud, these people reported higher levels of personal stigma. All of this suggests that there is a genuine link between negative media coverage and stigma – although we can only fully appreciate the media’s impact when we consider its inter-relationship with people’s everyday experiences.

Deservingness plays a key part in attitudes towards benefit claimants, but it is hard to tell from the outside if someone is ‘deserving’. Our prior beliefs about benefits and claimants (which we partly get from media coverage) therefore seem to affect whether we interpret the people we meet as deserving or undeserving. We found that people living in neighbourhoods with more benefit claimants perceive more fraud and report more self-stigma – but this is only true if they are inclined to view benefit claimants negatively (perhaps because of media portrayals). Given that the deservingness of benefit claimants is often hidden – the majority of disability benefit claimants say their disability is not visible to people who first meet them – people who already stigmatise benefits claimants may be more likely to both ‘see undeservingness’ and to see undeserving claimants as typical.

The other links between personal experience and stigma are complex. People in low social grades and with low education also attach more stigma to claiming benefits, which may partly be because of ‘seeing undeservingness’, but may also be a way for low-status people to enhance their own self-identity, and/or a displacement of people’s financial worries.

When we look at the relationship between knowledge of claimants and stigma, there is no sign here that knowing claimants reduces stigma or perceived fraud – but this may be because we have no direct measures of how many claimants people know, and how well they know them. Examining the opposite thesis – that areas of high benefit claims and knowledge of benefit claimants create a ‘dependency culture’ – we find that benefits claimants report lower stigma than non-claimants, as we would expect given evidence on take-up. However, both claimants and non-claimants alike overwhelmingly reject the idea that people should be ashamed to claim benefit, and there is no evidence that people in areas of high benefit claims feel any less stigma (indeed, the reverse is true). There is therefore no support for most of the predictions of the ‘dependency culture’ thesis.

We also looked briefly at international evidence, for insight into how the design of the benefit system affects attitudes towards claimants. This suggests that countries with benefit systems based on contribution or on citizenship, rather than on a means-tested basis, are less likely to see high levels of benefits stigma.

What is the impact of benefit stigma?

Both the quantitative and qualitative evidence suggests that stigma is playing a role in explaining non-take-up of benefits and tax credits. Participants in our focus groups believed that stigma would influence their decision whether or not to claim benefits, with some arguing that the design of the benefit system was intended to discourage claiming, and around one in four respondents to the MORI survey giving at least one stigma-related reason for delaying or not claiming benefits.

Looking at trends over time, non-take-up of benefits has risen concurrently with stigma, and stigma may therefore have played a role in non-take-up trends, although this evidence is only suggestive rather than definitive. We can, however, see a notable success in recent years in reducing stigma when we look at tax credits. People were more likely to say that they would delay/avoid claiming benefits than tax credits due both to (i) 'how you would feel about yourself for claiming (e.g. 'pride', dislike of 'charity')'; and (ii) 'thinking [benefits/tax credits] are for other people, not people like me'. Together with the increase in tax credit take-up over time, this suggests tax credits have been successful in reducing stigma.

Beyond the impact of stigma on take-up, focus group participants were clear that stigma had a negative impact on their own sense of self worth. Claimants of disability benefits described the process of demonstrating their 'incapacity' in order to make a claim as humiliating and discouraging. Jobseeker's Allowance claimants spoke of having to combat feelings of negativity that the distance between perceptions of them as 'scroungers' and their own difficulties in finding employment produced. While there is mixed evidence from the literature as to whether benefits stigma results in worse mental health for claimants, we think that the evidence from our focus groups of the negative treatment and lack of respect experienced by claimants should be sufficient to prompt action.

Recommendations

Based on the evidence in this report – particularly on the nature of stigma in chapters 2 and 3, and on its causes in chapters 4 and 5 – we end with a series of recommendations for how stigma could be reduced. These are split into recommendations on (i) benefits delivery; (ii) the design of the benefits system; (iii) the media; and (iv) public messages around benefits.

Benefits delivery

Changing the way that benefits are delivered is perhaps the most obvious place to start trying to reduce stigma. If claimants are treated with respect then institutional stigma will be low; if they are treated with hostility and an implication that they are undeserving until proved otherwise, then stigma will be high. Stigma will be highest if the process of claiming benefits routinely violates norms of privacy; for example, some US states still check on welfare eligibility by conducting unannounced midnight raids on single parents' houses (Gustafson 2011).

Reducing stigma will also help deliver effective welfare-to-work services that get people back into work as quickly as possible. A review of the literature around the delivery of employment programmes found that the relationship between the adviser and the claimant was key to the effectiveness of programme delivery (Bell and Smerdon 2012). The report suggested that such relationships flourish *inter alia*¹¹³ in situations where advisers have an attitude of trust and respect towards claimants, and a separation, where possible, between the roles of policing the system and supporting clients to tackle any barriers to employment. Treating claimants with respect is therefore efficient as well as fair.

There are some limits to how far benefits delivery can be made unstigmatising without broader changes – while JSA claimants in one of our focus groups were particularly clear that attendance at the jobcentre could often be a humiliating process, they recognised that the behaviour of individual officials was embedded within a larger institutional setting (as

¹¹³ A related issue was the continuity of relationships and sufficient time in which to develop them. Participants in our focus groups also commented that they felt that their negative treatment by advisers was often underpinned by the fact that they were under-resourced.

we discuss in the next section). But there are still a number of concrete steps that could be taken to reduce stigma:

Jobcentre Plus and other staff (including eligibility assessors such as Atos) should be given periodic training to challenge their own perceptions about claimants, in the same way that social workers are trained to be non-judgmental. The claimant-led Citizen's Commission on the Future of the Welfare State (1997:119) likewise called for training 'to ensure that service users are treated positively, sympathetically and with respect, without stigma or hostility'.

There is a particular opportunity to reduce stigma as Universal Credit is rolled out from 2013. User testing has already identified concerns that the 'Claimant Commitment' would 'impose' a generic set of commitments on claimants that would not be taken seriously (Rotik and Perry 2012) – echoing findings within our own focus groups that the system was clearly not designed with people's particular situations in mind, and was unable to adapt to their own needs.

We suggest that one way of ensuring personalisation and a 'collaborative' process would be to ask the adviser to sign a commitment to offering certain support levels, alongside the claimant's commitment to performing certain activities (as recommended by the Citizen's Commission on the Future of the Welfare State 1997:119). Following the conceptual model in Chapter 1, providing a legal entitlement to support (even if this is conditional) is one way of reducing the stigma of claiming.

A further means of enhancing the status of claimants within the worksearch system would be to allow them to choose their own provider of welfare to work services, as is the case in the Netherlands (see Finn, 2008). This would also encourage welfare to work providers to seek a reputation for treating claimants with respect.

Besides reducing institutional stigma, the delivery of benefits can also reduce social stigma. For example, some US states deliver food stamps through electronic debit cards rather than the more obvious hard-copy vouchers,¹¹⁴ and a similar call has been made to deliver UK free school meals in confidence using well-designed electronic systems (Farthing 2012:29). This delivery of in-kind support is likely to become more of an issue as the Social Fund is devolved to a local level, with many local authorities considering providing goods such as beds and cookers in kind, rather than, as at present, through a grant (CPAG 2012). Online benefits advice resources like the Turn2us website (funded by Elizabeth Finn Care, who also funded this report) allow people to confidentially check their benefits eligibility.

The design of the benefits system

Given that the perceived deservingness of claimants is so important in benefits stigma, we might expect that designing a benefits system to reduce undeservingness through tough policies on fraud and conditionality would help reduce stigma. However, this approach has been tried and tested by the previous Labour administration, and in terms of stigma it was a failure: perceived undeservingness rose since 1997 (particularly among Labour voters; Sefton 2009: 240) (see also Baumberg 2012), even though conditionality increased substantially and fraud levels dropped (Horton and Gregory 2009:210). As we explore below, any positive effects of making deservingness manifest¹¹⁵ seem to be outweighed by the message this sends out about the typical deservingness of claimants.

Instead, it is more universal, contributions-based and generous benefits/benefit systems that seem to be less stigmatised. While our understanding here would be helped by more research, this basic picture emerges repeatedly in the wider literature and in both within-country and between-country comparisons – and is easily understood when we think of the absence of stigma for the state pension or Child Benefit. We can trace this back to the model of benefits stigma developed in Chapters 1–3:

¹¹⁴ We should however note that the evidence on whether this affects take-up is contested (McConnell and Ohls 2000 cited by Currie 2004:12; Ratcliffe et al 2007:18).

¹¹⁵ There are some signs that these effects can exist in the right circumstances; for example, the CESI evaluation of the Future Jobs Fund found that it did not have the stigma of being on e.g. unpaid placements (in Timms 2012:12).

- Non-contributory benefits without a clear citizenship basis are likely to be seen as non-reciprocated gift with overtones of 'charity', and therefore be stigmatised (particularly if they are discretionary; see Page 1984:133–). Contribution-based benefits can replace this with a sense of reciprocal exchange, while citizenship-based approaches give people the sense of having a legal 'right' to claim.
- Needs-based benefits by their nature force attention onto the question of whether people are truly in need and whether they are responsible for their situation (their 'deservingness'), which we have seen will raise levels of stigma.
- More universal systems will include more claimants who are seen as 'like us' by the majority of people, which will tend to reduce stigma.
- More generous systems will enable claimants to lead lifestyles that are more similar to the majority, again helping them be seen as more 'like us'. On the other hand, more generous systems may make claimants appear less needy, and these two influences will counterbalance each other to some extent.

Recently we have seen a notable success in the longstanding effort to reduce stigma by design:¹¹⁶ tax credits were deliberately designed to be less stigmatising by covering greater numbers of people further up the income distribution universal, and operating via the tax system rather than via jobcentres. We have seen that this led to lower stigma for tax credits than other benefits. It is possible that merging tax credits and benefits in the new 'Universal Credit' will further reduce benefits stigma, although there is at least a possibility that in-work support will instead become more stigmatised (particularly given the introduction of in-work conditionality and the disbaring of those with savings above £16k from claiming).

Yet despite this success, the broader trends in the design of the benefits system have probably increased stigma: benefit levels have become ever lower compared to average earnings, and benefits have become both less universal and less contributions-based. It is impossible to say just how much this has contributed to rising benefits stigma, but it seems likely that it has played some role because the system increasingly forces us to think sceptically about the deservingness of claimants. While changing the benefits design is clearly not a short-term fix for benefits stigma and must reflect numerous other concerns, the contributory principle is re-emerging into public debate in Britain (see, for example, Bell and Gaffney 2012), and in the long term such changes would likely contribute to a reduction in benefits stigma.

The media

This report was itself partly prompted by widespread concerns over the media's role in stigmatising benefit claimants. While we did not find that newspaper coverage has become unprecedentedly negative, there has been a genuine and considerable shift towards describing claimants as 'scroungers', together with a consistently striking number of stories about fraud. We found this coverage matters, both by looking at the link between newspaper readership and people's views of benefits, and also by priming people to think about fraud and seeing how people's feelings of stigma shifted. Not only is hostile coverage stigmatising in itself, but it also makes us more likely to think that other people stigmatise benefits (something we tend to overestimate, as Chapter 2 showed),¹¹⁷ particularly where titles use statistics to provide backing for generalised claims about the percentage of claimants who are 'scroungers' (see chapter 5).

We do not expect newspapers to avoid human-interest stories where people are fraudulently claiming benefits. But it would help reduce stigma – and help provide a more truthful picture of the realities of the benefits system – if they were to avoid falsely suggesting that such stories were somehow typical of benefit claimants in general. We therefore agree with the National Union of Journalists Disabled Members Council who (in late 2011) said:

¹¹⁶ For example, according to Page (1984:44), research on stigma in the 1960s convinced Labour to replace the stigmatised 'National Assistance' with 'Supplementary Benefits', moving this into the same benefit offices as insurance-based claimants.

¹¹⁷ See also Elizabeth Paluck on social norms and homophobia, <http://www.russellsage.org/blog/r-mascarenhas/dharun-ravi-verdict-lessons-reducing-prejudice-and-bullying>

'The NUJ Disabled Members Council calls on all journalists to continue to operate within our recognised code of ethics, which upholds the rights of all individuals and groups to fair and just representation. In line with our code the Disabled Members Council call on the NEC, all NUJ members and media colleagues to support and sustain fair and balanced reporting of matters relating to disabled people who are increasingly fearful, not just of the cuts being forced on them, but also of the continual demonising of disability.'¹¹⁸

Beyond this, it would be possible to help journalists who are motivated to reduce unjustified stigma by e.g. creating new NUJ reporting guidelines on benefits, or for an authoritative organisation (e.g. the British Academy or Economic and Social Research Council) to provide relevant, unbiased and easily accessible information on the realities of the benefits system.

Yet to significantly change the way that we talk about benefits claimants we need to go beyond exhorting journalists to behave differently, and instead look at concrete actions that could change the opportunities and incentives for journalists to report in different ways.

¹¹⁸ <http://www.disabilityalliance.org/nuj.htm> . The NUJ guidelines on reporting disability are available from <http://www.nuj.org.uk/files/reportingdisability.pdf>

Policymakers and public messages

Our analysis of media coverage shows a significant rise in the share of articles on benefits which are based on a statistic. This probably understates the increasing importance of statistics in news coverage, as our coding only allows us to identify the use of statistics where they form the 'news hook' for the story. As we have shown, statistics are also used to contextualise other types of story – both policy and 'human interest'.

Our interest in the use of statistics derives from a concern with the information the public use in forming judgments on benefit claimants. We have shown that judgments have a quantitative aspect – views on claimants are to a great extent views on the percentage of claimants with certain characteristics or meeting certain criteria for deservingness. As people do not, in general, have the information needed to estimate the relevant percentages, it is to be presumed that they rely on whatever published statistical information comes their way. The massive overestimation of benefit fraud among the public, combined with the striking number of articles about fraud in the press, suggests that newspapers and other media are playing an important role in influencing judgments, and our analysis provides strong support for this hypothesis. It seems reasonable to extend this to other aspects of stigma where criteria are more open to subjective interpretation – for example, 'scrounging' as opposed to 'cheating'. As we have seen, some titles clearly use statistics to provide backing for generalised claims about the percentage of claimants who are 'scroungers' (see chapter 5).

We have also seen a worrying interaction between government reform agendas and the use of statistics in media stories. This does not seem to be a new phenomenon. In 1999, Labour was accused by disability charities of negative briefing using official statistics. From 2004 to the present, claims that from two-thirds to four-fifths of incapacity benefit claimants were 'faking' have been appearing, apparently based on government briefing (see chapter 5).

There are some safeguards in place which limit government's ability to 'spin' official statistics. The Code of Practice for use of official statistics now forbids briefing of data prior to publication. However the Department for Work and Pensions has used briefing of 'ad hoc' statistics (produced by departmental analysts) prior to publication of the data and was reprimanded by the then Chair of the UK Statistics Authority, Sir Michael Scholar for this practice¹¹⁹. It is significant that the statistics which led to this rebuke were about a negative theme which we have seen has been of growing importance in media coverage: people who have never worked.

While there is rarely a single correct way of interpreting statistics¹²⁰, cases such as the misreporting of incapacity benefit reassessments involve gross misinterpretation of statistics beyond any reasonable interpretation. In this case, we have seen that no fewer than four titles converged on the same misinterpretation of the data. It is hard to see how government can not be held responsible for failing to prevent this happening.

We therefore recommend¹²¹ the UK Statistics Authority consider two sets of changes to the Code of Practice for Statistics:

For official statistics to be a credible contribution to public debate, full details need to be available to the public at the same time as journalists, and alternative voices should be heard:

- All written briefings to journalists by government departments which include official or ad hoc statistics, should be published to coincide with publication of news stories based on those briefings;
- Ad hoc statistics should be published at least 48 hours before any briefing by officials or advisors, or use of data in statements by ministers;

¹¹⁹ http://fullfact.org/blog/uksa_serious_deficiencies_in_dwp_statistical_arrangements-2383

¹²⁰ As Sir Michael Scholar noted (in the same letter), 'I see no objection to selective quotation from datasets of this kind, provided that they are presented fairly and accurately, and provided that the public has equal access to the database concerned, so that alternative selections may be made.' Link to PDF file of letter at http://fullfact.org/blog/uksa_serious_deficiencies_in_dwp_statistical_arrangements-2383

¹²¹ Our recommendations are similar but not identical to those in Inclusion (2010).

- Findings from research reports commissioned by departments should not be briefed before publication.

Public providers of official and ad hoc statistics should accept responsibility for predictable and repeated media misinterpretations,¹²² and should act to correct these:

- ONS and government departments should anticipate misreadings of statistical data and head them off in presentation;
- Departments should respond immediately and publicly to misleading newspaper stories based on their materials.

The government anti-fraud campaigns after 2000 (Grover 2005) also seem to have raised levels of stigma. Qualitative evidence by the DWP itself reports that ‘while [the public] recognised that benefit fraud is an issue in need of tackling, it was thought that this conveys an image of DWP as being a Department concerned with punishment, rather than support and empowerment’ (Hall and Pettigrew 2007:13). After one campaign, about 20% of the general public said the adverts ‘have put me off putting in a new claim for benefits, even if I might be entitled to them’, particularly for those who believed that others were undeserving (GfK NOP Social Research 2011:73–74). While we sympathise with the desire to uncover the small level of fraud that exists, there is significant ‘collateral damage’ of this approach on millions of non-fraudulent claimants.

Finally, policymakers can also influence stigma through the way that they talk about benefits, and the way that social security policy itself conceptualises claimants. We might think that talking tough on benefits would be an effective way of reducing stigma, convincing the public that there is little room for undeserving claimants. Yet in fact it seems to have precisely the opposite effect. By some considerable distance, the largest news hook for newspaper stories about benefits throughout this entire period was the policy process and 22% of policy-driven newspaper stories mention fraud. As we discussed under ‘benefit system design’, Labour’s emphasis on conditionality and tackling fraud seems to have led to higher levels of stigma (particularly among Labour sympathisers), convincing people that fraud is much more widespread than it actually is without tapping in to the stigma-reducing properties of citizenship or contributions. As Hoggett puts it, ‘by framing policies to appease real or imagined resentments, the underlying sense of grievance is strengthened rather than mollified’ (Hoggett 2012:14).

The influence of politicians’ rhetoric and media stories on stigma does offer hope, to the extent that it shows that people’s attitudes can change. Yet we recommend that those trying to reduce benefits stigma do **not** attempt to do this by demonising undeserving claimants. In fact, we think that a conversation that moves away from the individual characteristics of benefit claimants and on to one that looks at the broader issues behind benefit receipt, including economic factors and the significant employment penalties experienced by disabled people, is likely to be more productive, if the aim is to reduce the stigma of claiming benefits.

We also think it is vital that when talking about benefit claimants, politicians emphasise the actual facts about the social security system in Britain today, rather than reinforce myths. These include the fact that most claimants have made contributions in the past, many will work in the future, and that many more are contributing in other ways, including by caring (see Bell and Gaffney 2012 for further details).

A strong theme to emerge from participants in our focus groups was that politicians and media commentators had little idea of the reality of their lives. Greater effort by public figures to demonstrate that they ‘get’ what it is like to live on a low income, to experience disability, unemployment, or lone parenthood, and to understand the challenges and opportunities that these may pose, could go a long way towards tackling stigma, and increase the chance that all citizens are treated with respect.

¹²² When four national titles converge on the same misleading stories after briefing by government officials, as happened with the results of incapacity benefit reassessments, the responsibility surely lies with those providing the briefing <http://www.lefffootforward.org/2011/02/right-wing-press-wrong-on-incapacity-benefit-gain/>

In conclusion

In this report we saw that stigma is not just about politicians, the media and the process of claiming benefits; it is also about claimants feeling that other people around them see claiming benefits as shameful, and particularly where others doubted their deservingness. Everyday interactions play an important role in the stigmatisation of benefits – including those in which benefit claimants themselves stigmatise other claimants (see Chapters 2, 3 and 5).

It is clear that we are unable to judge the deservingness of others from casual acquaintance (the majority of disability benefit claimants have disabilities that are not apparent on a first meeting (Chapter 5), while nearly half of new claimants have fluctuating conditions (Sainsbury et al 2008:151)). The evidence in Chapter 5 suggested that our prior beliefs about claimants fill in the gaps in our knowledge; if we think that most claimants are undeserving then we will fit the limited information we find out into a picture of an undeserving claimant. The stigma generated by media coverage and politicians therefore feeds into the everyday stigma of individual interactions.

Our own views, beliefs, and interactions with others therefore have the potential to contribute to a climate of lowered stigma. We can reflect on the limited information we have about other people's lives, their right not to reveal this to every casual acquaintance, and therefore our limited capacity to fairly assess each others' deservingness. We can reflect on the poor understanding that most of us have of the benefits system, and just how rare fraudulent claims are. And we can encourage people that we know are dealing with disability, unemployment, single parenthood, or low pay – in short, the risks that the welfare state was set up to tackle – to claim the benefits that they are entitled to, with no sense of shame.

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